

**POST-PRODUCED CULTURES**

**META-IMAGES, AESTHETICS AND THE HAWZAS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present work explores my practice as a photojournalist researching anthropological issues in the Muslim world.

It uses the Hawzas, the Muslim Shi'a seminaries, as my case study to invite a visually informed approach to the human sciences, and promote a practical usage of aesthetics. Because of the dramatic disproportion between their socio-cultural relevance and their under-representation, the Hawzas offer an extremely valuable opportunity to research issues of Orientalism and Orientalist visual archives. By questioning my own fieldwork practice alongside the visual signification of the Hawzas, I reconnect the pre-production to the post-production phase, and encompass within a shared outlook issues of both the Real and the represented.

I assess the communicative features of the photograph in relation to the verbal as a caption, and to the visual, in montage. I concurrently posit the photograph within wider multimedia and multi-audience practices as a stand-alone communicative device *and* part of a visual montage: I identify a phenomenological framework of analysis to urge the radical rethinking of personal and social agencies, and suggest the notion of communicative hubs for today's globalised identities.

I explore the extent to which the digital is reshaping forms of visual-led and multimedia production, knowledge distribution and media consumption to finally contextualise the photograph as 'semantics without ontology.' I conclude advocating my ideas of the 'Meta-Image' and 'Public Cultures 2.0' as two integrated formats for visual-led communication, digital media practice, social engagement and public impact as specifically addressing Muslim cultures.

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A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know (Arbus 2012).

Photography is not about answers but about questions. And even when you find answers you have to question those answers. Photography is not about being nice: photography is cutting. You have to be sharp like a razor blade. Be horrible, in a human way. Be stupid. Leave obviousness and go for emotion in an animalistic, primitive way. You have to photograph like a dog, be on your knees. Be a thief of what surrounds you, get rid of safety, sharpen your pyramid and get to the acme where the tension is. And act. Don't complicate things, keep it simple and straight. Don't think. Be very strong or even very weak. Be naive, be afraid. Put in your pictures your longings, your dreams and nightmares. Keep a close distance when taking pictures: teach yourself to be inside and outside things at the same time. Tear down, destroy and re-build beauty. Don't be seduced by the beauty of a woman or man. The spectator shouldn't be invited by beauty, but by the magic, by your demons. Be cruel, true to yourself, honest to the world (Petersen 2011).

Society is concerned to tame the Photograph (Barthes 2000: 117).

## **[Chapter One] Introduction**

# **[CHAPTER ONE]**

## **INTRODUCTION**

If you take photos, don't speak, don't write, don't analyse yourself, and don't answer any questions (Doisneau 2012).

The present work explores how the expertise of the practitioner might enhance the understanding of the photograph, and use its digital component to link academia with the creative industries. I rely on two 'fieldworks' on the Hawzas, the Muslim Shi'a seminaries, to assess the extent to which a complementary appreciation of the medium 'photograph' might lead into a more thorough management of its enormous (and enormously problematic) possibilities.

Specifically, I aim to signal the under-employment of the communicative features of the visual, and suggest the extent to which its creative usage could enhance social sciences. On such regard, I invite a visual communication which is un-assertive: I will rely on a thorough reassessment of aesthetics to pursue an innovative stance in ethnographically framed visual communication.

This discussion builds on my 2010 photoreportages on the Hawzas of Syria and Bahrain: its theoretical contextualisation explores the digital quality of today's photography, and assesses some of its present limitations for academic analysis. Upon my results I propose the idea of the Meta-Image as a new paradigm to articulate a semantic appreciation of the photograph's aesthetic component, digital and Web 2.0 capabilities included. In more detail, the concept of the Meta-Image has emerged out, developed through and been tested against the exhibitions and workshops I have been running alongside my theoretical

research: the ultimate aim is to question the role of photography within current processes of knowledge production, communication and distribution.

I chose the Hawza as my case study to explore research issues of the 'Other' and Orientalism (Said 1978). However, my main concern will not be the Hawza as the Other, but instead the Hawza as the crossroad of many Others to many 'selves.' In fact, I aim to explore the extent to which identities are now more than ever multifaceted and multi-layered: a Hawza might be the Other for a Westerner, but not necessarily to a Pakistani third generation British-born; likewise an Italian convert might feel closer to the Hawza than to the original recipe of the Italian pizza. As for myself, I felt that the subjects I discussed with Sheikh Habib at the Hawza Al-Qaim of Manama were crucial to me and to my identity in spite of any difference in religious affiliation.

Furthermore, the messiness of the Hawzas I visited could contrast sharply to the 'sanitized' white walls of the exhibition spaces I was about to use: the potential for 'Other-ing' was enormous, particularly in light of the Hawzas' extreme invisibility in the 'West.' Consequently, not only I needed to question the practice of approaching, exploring and assessing the Hawzas in my field reportages, but its practices of representation too: in other words, I needed not to identify the Hawza, but the representation of the Hawza as 'what' to 'whom,' and, in such manner, assess both 'the what' and 'the whom.'

The Other has long been a privileged research question for photojournalism alongside its strong commitment to challenge, and possibly change, cultures and politics: I have identified in anthropology and cultural studies my main academic references as they both are preoccupied with the same issues. It is not coincidental that these identified practices, i.e.: anthropology, cultural studies and journalism, all access the medium 'photograph' in very distinct ways.

## As photography

permeates all aspects of life [...] it follows that historical, theoretical and philosophical exploration of photographs as images and object, and as photography as a range of types of practice operating in varying contexts, are necessarily wide-ranging (Wells 2009: 11).

Furthermore, today's proliferations of photographic usages through and *because of* digital media radically question how the visual is communicated, assessed and engaged. It appears that the derived multitude of practices variously concerned with photography articulates a highly debated and porous field of understanding. Such a multiplicity raises further issues on how to best use the medium for knowledge production and communication in the human sciences: it questions whether to, for instance, approach signification practices from an historical, practice-led, theoretically framed, religiously inspired or even socially articulated perspective.

Arguably, for each and every usage of photography within academic practice, a bibliography is already available and, through that, a theoretically derived framework. In Carr's words, Wells restates how "stories told reflect what the historian hopes to find, and where information is sought" (Wells 2009: 11). If this is the case, the perspectives for a far-reaching analysis appear to be questionable and very 'scientifically' limited (among many: Feyerabend 1975; Kuhn 1996; Lakatos, Feyerabend et al. 1999; Mitchell 1986). As a response to that, I have carefully advocated for a research which is self-contained and whose results are only very attentively used for parallel case studies: this is motivated both because of my phenomenological framework and the specificities of the photograph as a medium. As I research how the photograph signifies the Real, my findings led me to question not only the medium's ontology, what a photograph is, but its epistemology too: my tentative definition of the photograph as 'semantics without ontology' builds on the shift



from the film to the digital, and invites a new understanding of today's socio-cultural processes and dynamics.

In such a context, I differentiate between two consecutive activities connected by the shared moment of the photograph's production, namely the signification of the Real and that of the representation. By shifting the focus from the Hawza to its representation, I re-centre the relation across signification practices to investigate the extent to which information shapes photographic communication: this leads me to differentiate between documentary photography and documentary as a style. Walker Evans states very effectively how

[when] you say documentary, you have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. It should be *documentary style*, because documentary is police photography of a scene and a murder...that's real document [...] art is really useless, and a document has use. And therefore, art is never a document, but it can adopt that style [and] that presupposes a quite subtle knowledge of this distinction (Bogre 2012: 4, emphasis added).

Even though the signification of the Real and that of the representation are distinct moments, they nevertheless remain thoroughly intertwined in the very problematic categories of 'fictional' and 'un-fictionalised' photography: as a response, I will re-evaluate aesthetics as a fully communicative factor. In more detail, with aesthetics I here include any intervention on the photograph to inscribe its hermeneutic space at the moments of the signification of the Real and that of the representation. My aim is to demonstrate the extent to which form is content, and, as a consequence, how the established iconophobia (Taylor 1996) has been detrimental to photographic research in the human sciences: I aim to overcome Kant's established notion of aesthetics by suggesting its practical usage (Bennett 2012) in visual academic research.

As I will thoroughly assess in the following chapter, any approach to fieldwork is already a way to shape it and, possibly, 'produce' it. At the same time, I will underline the centrality of visual education as propaedeutic to any visual research. The latter statement might appear redundant, particularly in light of the current trends in digital and visual cultures: however, I feel that the human sciences, as well as photojournalism until the 1970s and early 1980s, have devoted little attention to the communicative power of aesthetics, and I wish to use my practical experience to promote a comprehensive investigation of its semantic possibilities. Specifically for the human sciences I fear that, despite any visual turn, very little has changed since Gardner's warning that

[too] many aspiring ethnographic filmmakers train on the job, having read the instruction manual for the camera they just bought on the flight taking them to the field (Gardner 1979: 433).

Gardner's unhappiness came out of his dedicated and thoroughly authorial engagement with the visual language and its complex and articulated media. I interpret his statement not as an elitist call to the mission of the 'Photographer,' but, rather, as an invitation to finally take photography seriously. In light of this, aesthetics will be promoted as the finalised and thorough management of the medium's communicative features.

Current research on neurosciences and flashbulb memories has assessed, particularly with reference to 9/11, how remembrance of a photograph has proved not only to last beyond memories of depicted events but also to create new forms of Real (among many: Hamzelou 2011). Because of that, I explore the extent to which mental imagery (Stanford 2010) might alter any intended representation within personal cognitive processes (Finkenauer 1998): the digital has already proven rather controversial for symbolic social maps and wider practices of knowledge production and transmission (Ritchin 2009).

I will eventually conclude my research by suggesting my idea of the Meta-Image as both a platform and an archive: it is a platform because it hosts the articulation (Grossberg 1986: 53) of a wide array of intertwined social practices, and an archive because it tracks and stores their developments. I eventually promote the Web 2.0 as the most effective tool to foster the 'public' (Borofsky 2001; Borofsky 2011) component of the Meta-Image as finalised for my tentative working format of Public Cultures 2.0.

### **THE HAWZAS AND 'THE OTHER'**

I will use my photoreportages on the Hawzas to build up the theoretical outlook of my research and contextualise a few dynamics for current media communication of Islam. In more detail, the Hawza is the Muslim Shi'a seminary: for the present context, the term 'seminary' refers both to a scholarly institution and the place of learning, thus representing, in an approximate manner, the Shi'a equivalent of the much better known Sunni *madrasa*. Throughout history, both institutions have sought to preserve, innovate within, and transmit Islamic education to elites and lower social strata alike, in ways that even coincided at certain times and places (Cancian 2005).

The Hawza's centrality lies primarily in the distinct quality of having been, and still being (to a large extent) the space where knowledge of all socio-political and religious matters is preserved and further re-articulated (Mottahedeh 1986). Its socio-political significance arguably equals that of *Fiqh* (religious judgement), as it appears to be of primary importance within the socio-political context of contemporary Shi'a Islam.

I chose to explore the daily life of the Hawzas when I realised the difference between its socio-political relevance and its dramatic visual 'invisibility.' Because of such under-representation, I felt it would offer me a privileged research case to test visual production

dynamics and dissemination practices: its socio-political relevance and contemporary widespread unawareness would allow me to assess a case study which is both 'Muslim' and 'un-assessed' even among many specialists of Islamic cultures.

My original PhD proposal intended to explore photographic representation of the Other to question the ontology of the photograph and current practices for media communication of Islam. To do so, I had in mind to follow three carefully selected social groups and photograph their daily life in Tehran: upon my findings I would have finalised a series of recommendation for 'anthropological' visual communication. While I was preparing for my fieldwork research in Iran, I began my collaboration for a British Academy project on the Hawzas. I quickly discovered the centrality of such an institution for the Muslim Shi'a world, and I agreed with my PhD supervisor that the Hawzas would have offered me an occasion to research a much more un-mapped and un-connoted space.

However, even though the Hawzas share a developed network of relations and centralise their trans-national education activities, nevertheless each of them preserves its own specificities. Hence, at a second stage, I would also have to question how choices over studied Hawzas would legitimise diverse representations, and, hence, distinct significations of the Real. In fact, a Hawza in India would be visually, and hence semantically, entirely different from a Hawza in Qom. Also, even Hawzas belonging to the same network, such as for instance, the Al-Qaim Hawzas I visited in Damascus and Manama, would not allow me to articulate comparable fieldwork experiences. And, eventually, even the same Hawza at two different times would lead me to arrange distinct significations of the Real. All these variables would lead me into producing rather diverse anthropological, visual and semantic understandings: how could I manage, signify and disseminate those un-systematic findings? Furthermore, how those results would impact

public discourse on Islam and promote specific social responses both within the 'Muslim' and 'not-Muslim' communities?

In such a context, I will address the extent to which the Other might be represented in photography, and, in so doing, question whether identities might be univocally assessed or perceived. Relying on my research on the photographic sign as a communicative vector, I will juxtapose the notion of 'representation,' with that of 'mental representation' and invite a fluid appreciation of identities: I will conclude my research suggesting the Meta-Image as a paradigm to manage social representations of a 'fluid' photographic subject for a 'fluid' audience over 'fluid' communicative forms.

For the present context, I will only add that the chosen countries, Syria and Bahrain, and their Hawzas, Sayyeda Zaynab in Damascus and the Al-Qaim Hawzas in both capitals, are of secondary theological relevance when compared to the core institutions of Qom in Iran and Najaf in Iraq. The political constraints of the period between 2009 and 2011 have influenced my decision to avoid either country as the social unrests in Iran and the civil war still defining Iraq would not have allowed me to pursue the research in condition of safety. In full accordance with my supervisor, we evaluated the socio-political space of the decentralised Hawzas of Syria and Bahrain as an extremely vivid and much engaging space of analysis, and shifted the focus of my research from the Hawza itself to practices of visual significations. Hence, my photoreportages on the Hawza are here used to explore my daily practice as a photographer and visual media communicator rather than being the main topic in itself. Eventually, I sadly admit I consider myself lucky enough to have visited those institutions right before Syria and Bahrain fell into a dramatic civil war.

## MY ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK

In my years as a media practitioner, I have been looking for intellectual perspectives that would help me to better confront the daily task of my professional activity, and I would test these theoretical approaches against my own practice. I can clearly identify in my disappointment with the current state of academic research on the photograph the rationale for my research. In fact, I could encounter an endless number of manuals and how-to books by practitioners, but not a single critical work written by a photographer. I discussed the issue with my immediate circle of colleagues, and interrogated the online photographic community through blogs and social spaces such as Lightstalkers: all participants concurred that those who knew how to photograph would not waste time with words, while those who either did not make it or actually never tried to would intellectualise an activity they knew very little about. The two worlds appeared as distant as they could be, and no Cartier-Bresson or Toscani would be able to reconcile the two faces of the same coin: in the end, many would share the advice I recall with Doisneau's initial quote.

I began wondering whether the academic-limited appraisal for the photographer's perspective might equally signal a lack of interest for the practitioner as an epistemological figure. Roanna Heller (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005: 133-142) and Sharon Bell (Smith and Dean 2009: 252-262) concur in implicitly questioning the extent to which theoretical work might remain separated from practical considerations. Their analysis interrogates the very delicate epistemological balance between theory and practice, and suggests a fully complementary perspective on practice-led work.

While researching the pervasiveness of the distrust theorists have for practitioners I contacted an established critic who was particularly dismissive of any photographer's contribution, commenting that "it would be too much [to ask] photographers for any

developed piece of theory” (Critic 2013, my translation). He went on saying that “theory requires an absolutely specific intellectual approach that has to be completely dissociated from any practice,” and concluded that “*techne* can be thoroughly analysed in all of its specificities, but cannot think itself as it cannot move out from itself, and look at itself” (Critic 2013, my translation). I eventually came not only to analyse but to *experience* what would be identified as a ‘too mundane’ understanding, that of the practitioner, which, arguably, is not capable of influencing nor impacting wider research concerns. Hence, I turned the lens away from my anthropological fieldwork on the Hawzas and directed it on myself too: by shifting the focus from the Real to its representation dynamics I wanted to produce a case-study on photographic research as carried by one of its practitioners.

I built my PhD research upon two ethnographies, the first in Syria in the Spring of 2010, and the second in Bahrain the following Autumn. As previously mentioned, I use my photographic work on the Hawzas to explore both the signification of the Real and the signification of the representation to eventually assess the centrality of aesthetics as semantics. In order to achieve that, I use my reportages to address the policies of signification of the ‘photograph.’ alongside production issues, I include both pre- and post-production concerns, and suggest the centrality of *montage* (Eisenstein 1977; Eisenstein 1986; Eisenstein 1987) as a semantic facilitator.

In such a theoretical framework, I have identified two distinct policies of intended signification: the simulacrum and the symbol. With the former, I identify a close-ended signification aiming at communicating a pipe as a pipe, as its metonymical representation. With the latter, I suggest a much wider and personally connoted space of interpretation in which audiences can appreciate a pipe as *many* pipes. With the first, I apply an unambiguous communication (Eco 1989b) that leads to little information. The latter echoes Eco’s concept of ‘infinite semiosis’ (Eco 1984a), and widens both informative and

communicative components within processes of communication: I will access these two paradigms in a value-free manner, with no ethical implication of sort. My ultimate aim is to use my own experience as visual media producer to explore intended significations and intertwine them with my appreciation of aesthetics as semantics for both the stand-alone photograph and the photo essay.

My analysis has largely benefitted from Roland Barthes (Barthes 1977; Barthes 2010) and Umberto Eco's (Eco 1979; Eco 1984a; Eco 1986) research as it explores the complex interrelations between information and communication (Mitchell and Hansen 2010). I have further integrated this theoretical framework through post-structuralist theorists and visual cultures analysts such as William Mitchell. Finally, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach (Merleau-Ponty 2011), Deleuze and Guattari's paradigm of the Rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and Floridi's philosophy of information (Floridi 2011) have all supported my research on the multiplicity of the identity.

### ***Ethnography And Anthropology***

My research is ethnographically derived. I strongly believe that the best way to assess any policy of representation of the Real is through the simultaneous questioning of the medium and all concerned identities with their performative practices. However, as I will detail below, to state the centrality of ethnography does not imply the contemporary relevance of anthropology as a discipline. On the contrary, by differently assessing the two intertwined disciplines, which are often appreciated as consecutive, I will complement the established communicative limitations of anthropology with a visually informed paradigm. By singling out anthropology's rather impoverished theory of communication (Borofsky 2001; Borofsky 2011), and the limited role accorded to audiences (Banks and



Ruby 2011: 288-312; Wade 1997), I will promote a semantic role for aesthetics, and advocate the extent to which form is constitutive of the content.

My research does not dismiss the extremely diversified and articulated legacy of anthropology. Rather, I aim to enhance the discipline with perspectives, tools, and possibilities borrowed from other research fields in order to contribute, as many have done before me, to its never-ending ontological reassessment. In such a derived framework, I assess media dynamics with a defining role. Poster championed such a perspective for more than two decades, drawing mainly on the intellectual legacy of Baudrillard, and of cultural studies at large: he appreciates not only how media is “an extension of ourselves” (McLuhan 2003: 9), but that media has established itself as the pivotal element encompassing and redefining all human activities (Poster 1995). Simultaneously, processes of mediatization and mediation are gaining analytical attention and cultural relevance (Couldry 2008), as are the new forms of digital storytelling (Campbell 2013b; Ritchin 2013). As a result of such a framework, anthropology might be perceived as having reflected over the medium too late, and I do not judge coincidental that the first photographic essay to appear in *Cultural Anthropology* dates at the end of 2012. Its author acknowledges how having

thoroughly debated *self*-reflexivity, perhaps it is time for media/modal-reflexivity [and] to begin evaluating anthropological scholarship not only on their content but also on their chosen medium (Gursel 2012, emphasis in the original).

The discipline’s history has recorded the widest array of available epistemologies and ontologies to the point of often putting its same core values at risk. Through Malinowski’s ontological revolution, anthropologists started building their epistemology right into the fieldwork, and endlessly re-adjusted their approach upon their own experience. Once recognised the centrality of the ethnographic practice, anthropological issues and

concerns would be arranged consequently: my practice-led approach to visual methodologies work follows the same routes.

More in detail, my crucial concern for the present research is to find a way of encompassing within the same research activity both production and signification in relation to representation and consumption dynamics. In the following chapter, I will explore some of the difficulties, financial, logistical and practical, for current academic research of particularly sensible socio-cultural contexts, such as that of the Hawzas. I will equally draw on my previous experience as a professional photojournalist to finalise a renewed photographic practice for ethnography. I am fully aware of the epistemological problems arising from an unclear definition of the differences between these distinct (?) fields of analysis. However, in times of extremely severed budget restrictions, mobile communities and fluid identities, the possibility to pursue prolonged ethnographies, as it is generally the case for anthropology, is less and less available, and I will compare my works in Syria and Bahrain to explore the extent to which fieldwork length might impact visual research. Concurrently, I assess anthropology as a research field rather than a discipline, and will explore the issue at some length in due course.

Therefore, even though I assess both epistemological and ontological concerns for anthropology and media studies, I am not interested in genealogies across un-clearly defined disciplinary boundaries; rather, I will use the synergetic quality of current research to overcome distinct ontologies, and to bridge the gap between academia and the creative industries. I value such a stance as fundamental as my previous professional background has convinced me of the extent to which academic research can enhance the public dimension of the creative industries and *vice versa*.

This also motivates the wide variety of approaches and generative analytical mash-ups (Borschke 2012; Lessig 2011) my PhD relies on to mould together distinct theoretical paths and diverse practical concerns. My established media and photojournalistic background is here finalised to anchor and pivot my practice-led research, and I view this as crucial within current digital media academic research. My conclusions acknowledge the extent to which the digital component of today's cultures redefines production, consumption and dissemination activities, and promotes a renewed appreciation of performance and identities (Gauntlett 2011).

### ***Performance And The Symbol In The Human Sciences***

The extent to which performance influences or is a part of research in the human sciences is very debatable, as the issue has been mostly associated with the arts and rather infrequently with academic work. With reference to anthropology, both Victor Turner (Turner 1975; Turner 1977) and Gregory Bateson (Bateson 1972) have devoted special attention to the subject, and arranged a central role for both the agency and the symbol. Clifford Geertz further developed, if not overwhelmingly inscribed, the discipline with his revolutionary approaches (Geertz 1975; Geertz, Geertz et al. 1979) and prepared the field for the ground-breaking appearance of *Writing Culture* (Clifford, Marcus et al. 1986).

Even though *Writing Cultures* has managed to re-centre anthropological and ethnographic research by encompassing post-structuralist perspectives, I nevertheless assess its legacy as rather limited overall. I am conscious of how my assessment might prove particularly controversial, as is always the case with legacies; I am also aware that any appraisal of anthropology as a single concept is doomed to failure due to the multifaceted and varied dimensions of the discipline.

However, though anthropology as a discipline accepts secondary paths alongside mainstream ones, it does not forget to hierarchize them. In such a theoretical framework, the issue of media consumption (among many: Fiske 1987; Gauntlett 2007; Gauntlett 2012; Moores 1993; Morley 1992; Morley and Chen 1996) might be singled out as the most effective tool to differentiate anthropology from media and cultural studies: both cultural studies and anthropology have interpreted the 'receiver' as either a 'spectator' or 'audience,' but the first is rather pivotal for anthropology, and the second in cultural studies. As for some of the sub-fields of anthropology, like anthropology of media or visual anthropology, they also have promoted alternative frameworks, but their ontological hybridities have only partially incorporated the magnitude of the *Writing Cultures* turn.

## **THE VISUAL IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH**

Once sketched the theoretical outlook contextualising the terms of my research and before proceeding into the account of my practice-led research, I will briefly explore how photography has been perceived within (visual) anthropology and (visual) cultural studies.

### ***Anthropology***

Banks and Ruby's edited work on visual anthropology (Banks and Ruby 2011) has proved to be particularly illuminating in addressing the difficult relation between the 'anthropological' and the 'visual:' in fact, while it is a very clear summary to the present state of academic research, it implicitly revealed some of its established contradictions.

In their introduction, Banks and Ruby state how they "limit [themselves to] the anthropological endeavours of those who recognized the contemporary anthropological project and the image-making activities of those who understood the project or were in other ways engaged with it" (Banks and Ruby 2011: 1). They equally apply the tag 'visual

anthropology' mainly, if not solely, to those who "were engaged in anthropological analyses for which *image analysis was a part, but only a part*" (Banks and Ruby 2011: 2, emphasis added): in such a manner, they clearly close off the research field from enterprises and challenges external to the self-defined boundaries of the discipline.

It follows that the overwhelming dimension of Ruby's legacy on visual anthropology (Ruby 1975; Ruby 1976; Ruby 1982; Ruby 1991; Ruby 1996; Ruby 2008) has (unfortunately) shaped the predominance of the anthropological component over the visual. It has equally sidelined alternative research outlooks such as David MacDougall's (MacDougall 1998; MacDougall 2005) and Robert Gardner's (Barbash and Taylor 2007; Gardner 2008). Concurrently, *Writing Cultures* never explicitly approached the visual element with its research, as Clifford and Marcus engaged with 'visual anthropology' for just a single paragraph (Banks and Ruby 2011: 18).

The established narrow definition of "ethnographic films as that produced by anthropologists for anthropological purposes" (Banks and Ruby 2011: 3) has sealed off the discipline from issues of aesthetics too: Banks and Ruby consistently assess that the medium should not be mistaken for the message for the "issue is essentially one of context" (Banks and Ruby 2011: 8). Nevertheless, through my practice, I constantly experience the extent to which distinct approaches to the visual fieldwork not only represent a crucial methodological choice but affect – profoundly – final findings and representational concerns (See Chapter Two): to signify the representation is consecutive to signifying the Real.

I will compare the Russian Centre of Visual Anthropology (RCVA) with the Centre for Visual Anthropology at Goldsmiths University to exemplify the variety of different intellectual affiliations, theoretical inceptions and comprehensive research outlooks of the

debate. My (arbitrary) choice intends to juxtapose two educational institutions, one rather traditional and the other innovative; pending issues will be eventually re-assessed with reference to Akos Ostor's entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

The RCVA assesses visual anthropology as

neither simply cinema nor simply ethnography. During its short history [...] visual anthropology has revealed itself much broader than filming of exotic peoples. The current definition of visual anthropology sounds like follows: it is a cultural activity where cinema art, humanities and IT interact to receive and include in social practice visual information on ethnic traditions to perform dialogue of cultures [...] It seems to be one of the most effective means to prevent ethnic and religious conflicts. It aims at preserving images of little known and vanishing cultures, showing their specificity and universal essence, dialogue between alienated worlds (RCVA 2012).

Though the cross-media component of contemporary research is fully appreciated as a “cultural activity where cinema art, humanities and IT interact,” reference to “ethnic traditions to perform dialogue of cultures” re-centres the discipline within its established positivistic legacy. In such a context, visual anthropology can be seen as a pedagogical endeavour, as it aims to “prevent ethnic and religious conflicts,” while promoting “dialogue between alienated worlds.”

Conversely, Goldsmiths University, one of the most innovative visual centres in the UK, introduces its Master of Arts programme as one “designed for those with a background in anthropology who want to continue their studies through a unique combination of theory and visual practice” (Goldsmiths 2012). Its wide open definition is finalised to “enlarge the possibilities for a visual anthropology that is not only connected with the professional concerns of anthropologists, but also adequately presents *anthropologically-informed* representations to other audiences” (Goldsmiths 2012, emphasis added).

Goldsmiths' definition arguably invites an appreciation of anthropology as an outlook, even as a tool, rather than as an academic discipline. Its aim is informed with the relation between representations and audiences, and it might arguably better fit a media derived model of communication: the bridge separating the two outlooks seems rather wide.

### ***A Wider Paradigm***

The entry written by Akos Ostor for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is understandably more articulated and comprehensive than the ones above. To him, visual anthropology is

both the practice of anthropology through a visual medium and the study of visual phenomena in culture and society. Therein lie the promise and dilemma of the field. Associated with anthropology since the mid-to-late 19th century, it has not attained the status of a sub discipline with a distinct set of theories and methods [but evolved in] a collection of diverse interests and practices, most notably in the use of visual data for analysis, [and] the application of film and photography as tools in field research, and, to a lesser extent, the dissemination of anthropological ideas through visual media (Ostor 2012).

In his definition Ostor encompasses the most pressing research questions of visual anthropology and includes how anthropologists arranged the relation between the medium and the message, and that between the verbal and the visual. This exceptionally balanced result might be the result of his long-term collaboration with director Robert Gardner and their devoted attention to aesthetics. Ostor further adds that

the 19th-century heritage of anthropology, representing science and positivism on the one hand and humanities, romanticism, and hermeneutics on the other [as] wedded to functional theory in anthropology and realist aesthetics in art and literature, [brought] film [to seem] easily adaptable to a 'scientific' visual project. Though largely ignored by anthropologists, the aesthetic aspects were also present from the beginning, a circumstance that led to 100 years of misunderstanding (Ostor 2012).

The juxtaposition between aesthetics and (functional) realism has informed all the disciplines whose aim is to mould together diverse epistemological concerns and media forms (verbal VS. visual). The oppositional understandings of anthropology as either a tool or a discipline (i.e. Herodotus versus Malinowski) mirror that of documentary as a style or a form. As “different competencies [are] rarely brought together in one person” (Ostor 2012), anthropologists have consistently preferred the verbal to the visual (Engelbrecht 2010), thus prioritising the message over the medium (Gursel 2012).

At the same time, and my experience has consistently confirmed it, the visual, and the photograph specifically, have been used as a supporting notepad for a verbally inscribed project (Hervik 2010). My understanding is that the functional appreciation of the visual as a support to the verbal has inscribed the discipline since its first experiments (Bateson and Mead 1942), and got established in manuals and reference books such as Colliers’.

In such a context, the fieldwork dimension of the discipline might arguably be assessed as its (only) shared epistemology. Because of its constant and endless theoretical reframing, anthropology might appear to be a weak discipline, for which Ruby has strenuously preserved the primacy of the verbal over the visual. As mentioned above, *Writing Cultures* has changed little, and the overall verbal dimension of anthropology has not been affected. Paul Rabinow has recently noted that

*Writing Culture* occupied a fascinating and yet a strangely odd place in that history of anthropology. It was fascinating in the ways it continued the history of the discipline, specifically in that it intellectualised – both analytically and politically – its key defining practice, namely fieldwork [...] *Writing Culture* is a political and epistemological critique of ‘ethnographies as texts’ [which marked] the beginning of another kind of anthropology, the aim of which was to reformulate and restate the anthropological project, to invent new ways of being an anthropologist or ethnographer (Rabinow, Marcus et al. 2008: 2-6).



With my work I explicitly wish to contribute to the theoretical stream of research following the *Writing Cultures*' debate: by theorising upon my own practice, I aim to contribute to the extremely lively and fertile epistemological and ontological research approaching anthropology as a field rather than a discipline. Concurrently, I will suggest the relevance of aesthetics as semantics and, by doing so, assess a few opportunities to conduct visual-led ethnographic analysis.

### ***Media And Cultural Issues***

Though *Writing Cultures* paid very little attention to the visual, it has nevertheless thoroughly questioned anthropological practice to the point of establishing a 'before' to an 'after.' Following *Writing Cultures*, a new awareness of the limits and possibilities of anthropology has emerged, and the anthropological practice has been testing new practices and formats. The concurrent development of media and cultural studies has further invited a new appreciation of the role of audiences, and innovative communicative practices have supported a new range of re-conceptualisations, perspectives and ways of doing (Pink 2006; Pink 2012). However, in spite of the large amount of research and fieldwork activity of the last twenty years or so, my direct experience of anthropology has shown that the photograph is still regarded as a mere supporting tool. As I had the opportunity to experience through my collaborative fieldwork in Syria

in order for a visual product to be considered a piece of anthropology, its aesthetic value *can* be discarded as a valid criterion, whereas its being result of serious and disciplined anthropological research should be the most relevant element (Cancian and Fusari *forthcoming*, emphasis added).

Even though there has been a definite expansion of anthropological sensitivities (Pink 2009), it appears that the discipline has nevertheless preserved a functionalist understanding of the medium overall: the last four years of research and devoted

engagement with anthropologists have consistently reiterated my disappointment with the lack of more nuanced, articulated and visually centred frameworks.

As contemporary societies introduce, arrange, manage, produce and digest an ever-growing amount of information, information becomes increasingly relevant because of the way new media amplify both personal and social cultural domains (Baudrillard 1994; Hartley 2002; McLuhan 2003; Ritchin 2010; Ritchin 2013). Diverse yet converging new tools, including, but not limited to, mobile and smart phones, tablets and computers, are not only changing communicative dynamics, but radically re-shaping daily life across all social settings and world cultures (Qualman 2013). The availability of new technologies and the affordability of media devices further promote their unparalleled diffusion and, arguably, support a thoroughly media led new cultural world (Baudrillard 1988). Unfortunately, today's popularisation of visual practices does not automatically imply their public understanding; likewise, knowledge production and dissemination practices are not easily incorporated within wider theoretical frameworks.

In such an articulated theoretical context, mediation (Danesi 2009: 194) processes for both the political and cultural field endlessly promote Islam to the front page of social discourse and media representations. Even though it may currently be the most represented subject, Islam still hangs precariously between issues of Orientalism, over-simplified generalisations, and over-indulgent self-representations, thus producing systematic misunderstandings. Concurrently, the established media centrality of today's world radically questions the relation between the Real and its representation (Shaheen 2009), thus raising specific concerns over processes of simulation (Baudrillard 1994) and, finally, of a supposedly simulated Muslim world (Baudrillard 1995; Baudrillard 2002; Beckett 2012). As much as current media simulate (Smith 2010: 206) and, in due course, produce

the Real, so they can articulate their socio-political power relations, and promote different socio-political agendas.

Through my notions of the Meta-Image and of Public Cultures 2.0 I will eventually promote the centrality of Web formats for the development of a public political agenda. I remain aware of how previous attempts, even at the highest level, such as with President Khatami's 2001 United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilisations, have, in the end, been rendered futile after 9/11. Nevertheless, the socio-political relevance of visual communication in inter-cultural issues has reached unprecedented levels: the production of the 2012 *Innocence of Muslims* video proved to be as exemplary as it was tragic in its consequences. Its dissemination on a YouTube channel raised crucial questions for a large number of political actors. One among many, the much-celebrated digital government of US President Barack Obama rather dramatically epitomised the unpreparedness of all political figures in managing the first 'visual war.' This is the reason why a thorough assessment of the *Innocence of Muslims* affair should recommend a more precise command of the digital component for visual and multimedia online communication.

In light of this, my research intends to contribute to a better understanding of the specific qualities of the photographic medium as explicitly applied to socio-political and digital public communication. I will propose "how the important issue, whatever we call ourselves, is doing whatever it takes – short of the unethical – to solve the social problems at hand" (Borofsky 2001). Hence, for the present context, I approach anthropology as a subject of research *solely*, as a field of concern rather than a comprehensive discipline.

Concurrently, fieldwork is here applied to both the research I carried when studying the Hawzas in Syria and Bahrain and to the self-reflective one on myself researching the

Hawzas: by explicitly pursuing the modal-reflectivity evoked above, I wish to recall and creatively incorporate the widest umbrella of theoretical and practical solutions available. In such a networked framework I address issues of both semantics and psychoanalysis as my audience response sessions have evinced the extent to which personal and social dynamics might impact research frameworks. Hence, I aim to widen in an as inclusive as possible manner the field of my references to explore (1) the complex network through which the author's identity un/reveals, (2) the dialogical relation between the photographer and her representations, and (3) the photograph's overall performative dynamics.

### **THE THESIS STRUCTURE**

As mentioned above, I posit the basis for my theoretical analysis in my 2010 photographic research in Syria and Bahrain. Even though I might refer to my previous professional expertise, my photographic essays on the Hawzas remain the pivot of this work.

There are many ways in which I could have handled my project. One could have focused on initiating a dialogue with my researched subject, debating how my work might impact their lives and how they felt my photography was portraying them. This is one of the paths I initially thought I would cross, but I touch on it only very tangentially: even though I used every occasion to engage in a dialogue the Hawzas of Syria, Bahrain and the UK, I was endlessly kept outside its sanctified space with an extremely limited response. Hence, in lights of the many limitations I suffered, I thought preferable to address other theoretical questions.

At the same time, my theoretical research and practical exploration of issues in communication was leading me towards a more phenomenological perspective with the overcoming of the notions of 'subject' and 'object.' Approaching all concerned identities,

from the photojournalist-ethnographer to the viewer, as fluid entities, or, as I will argue, as communicative hubs, brought to eventually question Orientalism as the Other from whom.

The fully intertwined relation between theory and practice will be a consistent feature throughout an analysis which I began not at the time of my enrolment at the University of Exeter, but almost ten years earlier. It was during my MA research at SOAS that I first encountered the work of Robert Gardner, and his devoted appraisal of (modal) aesthetics for visual anthropology. My interest in developing such an undervalued feature for academic research continued through my daily practice as a professional photojournalist and media researcher: I aim to use this thesis to incorporate such a crucial semantic possibility to enhance academic analysis beyond established epistemological affiliations and narrower research approaches.

I have used this first Chapter to introduce the main themes of my research and contextualise the background, both theoretical and experiential, for the unwrapping of my perspectives. Chapter Two arises from my desire to approach ethnographic practice through the (to me extremely valuable) insights of the professional photographer: by preferring the notion of 'The signification of the Real' to 'Reportage,' 'Fieldwork' or 'Ethnography,' I explicitly advocate the extent to which the fieldwork is much more than the data collection, and represents the comprehensive gaze through which I address, question and understand what I see, feel and experience. Through the signification of the Real I embrace a wider perspective and explore both my pre-production strategy and production tactics. I concurrently assess not only my experience at the Hawzas of Damascus and Manama, but myself doing the work too. I eventually suggest verisimilitude as a tactical approach to meaning production and as *my* way to dodge the controversy over 'real,' 'fake,' 'staged,' 'fictional' and 'un-fictionalised' photography. I conclude the chapter by re-contextualising the fieldwork issue in light of the comparison I set between my

ethnographies of Syria and Bahrain. I finally introduce the issue of modal-reflectivity and the possibilities of a semantic appreciation of aesthetics.

Chapter Three and Four address the two-fold quality of the photograph as a stand-alone and sequenced medium. I develop my practice-led analysis on the 'photograph' to a new level: consequential to its quality of signifying the Real, the photograph 'becomes' a representation which signifies because of the semantic field it is immersed into. I will use a wide array of examples to foster the extent to which the photograph is not a mirror of the Real, but 'something' which engages the Real in a wide variety of ways, from its relation to a verbal caption, to projected significations or past memories. I identify in the symbol and the simulacrum two intended policies of communication which I approach in a value-free manner. More in detail, Chapter Three posits the 'photograph' at the crossroad of a large number of diverse research outlooks, specifically addressing my phenomenological perspective and the unique quality of the photograph to signify as a stand-alone vector and as part of an ordered sequence (the montage): both dynamics concur to support my notion of photography as 'semantics without ontology.' Chapter Four completes my outlook on the photograph by juxtaposing meaning generation to creation as the two main practices of montage. I detail my intended significations for the reportage on Bahrain and the visual essay combining the two archives of Syria and Bahrain for my exhibition at the British Museum.

Further building on the results of my two-folded ethnographies, I have identified in my idea of the 'Meta-Image' a new communicative paradigm: Chapter Five builds on the opportunities and frustrations of my fieldwork and research work on the Hawzas, and assesses it alongside the format Public Cultures 2.0 to wrap-up my findings; it suggests a conclusive framework, and sketches the advantages of a creative linkage between academia and the creative industries. I rest my dissertation wondering whether a modular

structure with interactive and multiple audience-led paths could have better supported and further promoted the present work.

## **[Chapter Two] Signifying The Real**



## [CHAPTER TWO]

### SIGNIFYING THE REAL

For better *and* worse the regulative ideals and imagery of ethnographic research remain deeply engrained and largely unchanged. Consequently, there is much discussion, confusion, and negotiation [...] about how to resignify, indeed, reimagine, anthropology's emblematic research process. (Marcus 1998: 4, emphasis in the original).

This chapter explores some of the most pressing financial, logistical and practical concerns for the fieldwork pre-production and production of an 'anthropological' photo essay: to do so, I will rely on my experience in Syria and Bahrain, and contextualise my findings for both the stand-alone photograph (Chapter Three) and the whole photoreportage (Chapter Four).

For the present context, I will use interchangeably the notion of the 'photo essay' and that of the 'photoreportage,' despite the first belonging mainly, if not solely, to the academic world, and the second to photojournalism: I do so since both refer to a collection of *ordered* photographs. As mentioned above, this thesis assesses an anthropological issue, the Hawzas, through the ethnographic research and the questioning of how the photojournalistic activity develops.

I will first account for my fieldworks in Syria and Bahrain and then explore the terms for a renewed approach to anthropological practice with a still camera. I will contextualise the above issues within what I have addressed as the signification of the Real: I have preferred the expression to 'Reportage,' 'Ethnography' or 'Fieldwork,' as I aimed to make theoretically explicit the extent to which pre-production and production are not either neutral or indifferent practices, but *fully shape* the research. Chapter Three and Chapter

Four will complete my argument through the signification of the representation (of the Real).

### **THE ETHNOGRAPHY – FIELDWORK ISSUE**

I have already stated my desire to move beyond the established boundaries of anthropology as a discipline; while writing, I evaluated shifting from the notion of 'anthropology' to that of 'ethnography' to avoid disciplinary confusion, but I realised it would have produced an un-motivated epistemological change with no thorough problematisation. Instead, I preferred to capitalise on my expertise as a professional photojournalist to intertwine anthropological concerns with multimedia practice.

Hence, this chapter is not an anthropological recollection or some sort of ethnographic diary of my fieldwork. The description of what happened to me is provided here to explore the methodological framing of data collection not as a descriptive analysis but as the first part of a comprehensive practice of signification: in order to explicitly motivate my shift, I preferred the title 'signifying the Real' to alternatives such as 'the fieldwork,' 'an ethnographic diary' or similar. I aim to approach the photograph as the product of the signification of the Real and the representation, and in order to do so, I wish to theoretically inform my 'fieldwork practice' within the terms of my thorough perspective.

### ***Requirements For Anthropological Research Outside Academia***

Since I began looking for a job position in anthropology after my 2001 MA in Anthropology of Media, I have been continuously denied any request for extended fieldworks. The jobs I would apply for would not economically sustain even a six month period of research abroad, and, because of that, I would be invited to substantially reduce the length of my

ethnography: this moment marks the beginning of my problematisation of the anthropological practice.

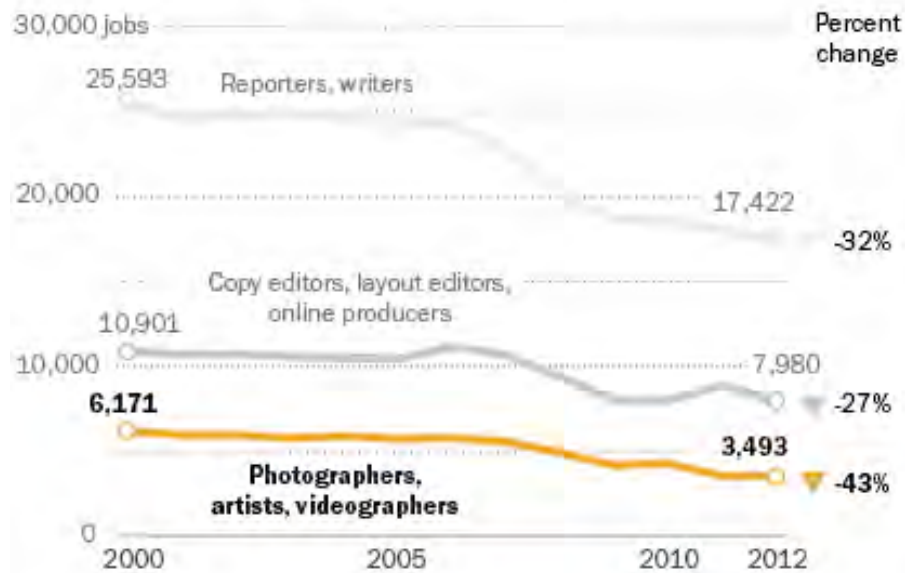
In the ten years separating my MA from my PhD I have been exploring the issue through my own work, experimenting with practice-led solutions for both verbal and visual-led collaborations in the creative industries. With reference to anthropological research in journalism or photojournalism, I have suffered the industry's time and budget constraints, with few if no, opportunities to pursue extended personal accounts.

Journalism, and photojournalism, might be taken as paradigmatic of today's media evolving conditions. Following the 1970s golden age of journalism (as exemplified with the Watergate) and photojournalism (with the coverage of the Vietnam War), these industries have suffered from the lack of innovative frameworks from the mid 1980s (Ritchin 2010): as a result, investigative research has deteriorated to a level that proved very detrimental to the understanding of today's socio-cultural and political issues. Concurrently, the 1991 First Gulf War established new media management policies by beginning the era of the 'embedded (photo)journalist': the progressive digitalisation of today's world as coupled with the dramatic increase in publishing requirements (Randall 2013) have overall altered the newsroom's dynamics, practices and processes. Examples of independent productions, such as those of photojournalists Michael Yamashita (2002) and Sebastiao Salgado (1998; 2007; 2013a), have become rather infrequent for the increased difficulties in ensuring one's full creative independence through private, separate and unconventional funding.

The profound crisis that all fields of journalism, and even more of photojournalism, are going through is well epitomised in the table below: data show how more than 43% of professional photojournalists in the US have been laid off since 2000.

## Photographers Among Those Hit Hardest by Job Cuts

*Number of U.S. newspaper jobs, by job category*



Source: American Society of News Editors

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

*Media Market Development. Source: <http://teresaschmedding.com/>.*

Furthermore, the majority of professional photographers are employed either as freelancers or external consultants: hence, the above negative trend would prove even more dramatic if we considered solely the category “photographers” without the “artists and videographers.” In conclusion, data deeply under-estimates the situation, but should nevertheless well illustrate the problematic status of the photographic market, which, incidentally, is even more perceptible across Europe.

However, today’s evolving digital framework might invite the appreciation of digital formats not only as a curse to the profession, but as generative opportunities too. In fact, they might provide viable representational strategies using alternative and independent networks such as, for instance, the ones Kadir Van Lohuizen (2012) relied on: through a

crowd-funding online platform the Dutch photographer had his anthropological research fully supported and, with that, convinced other promoting partners to provide for his forty week trip from the Tierra del Fuego in Chile to Prudhoe Bay in Alaska. By travelling the *Via PanAm*, he successfully explored and narrated migration processes through a variety of media forms, and produced his findings through the communicative platforms of a dedicated website and an iPad application. I reckon this as an example of the extent to which the digital is thoroughly revolving the whole knowledge production, communication and distribution system but also offering new framesets for anthropological research: as much as it is frightening for its destabilising effects, so it is terribly exciting and challenging.

### ***The Fieldwork Experience In Academia***

The problematisation of the fieldwork practice has been a crucial issue since Malinowski, and regained full intellectual attention with the *Writing Cultures*' epistemological divide. Marcus argues that there has been an overall under-usage of the intellectual possibilities of 1980s' theoretical research, and of the generative possibilities brought about by cultural studies (Marcus 1998). In such a discussion space, whether the researcher might deal with the research subject in terms of

'complicity' rather than 'rapport' signals the rethinking that needs to be done about the primary conception of subjectivities involved in fieldwork relationships when the 'Other' and 'getting inside' lose their force as the tropes that define the scene of the fieldwork (Marcus 1998: 6).

Much critical work has been produced and continues being produced: through my practice-led rethinking of agencies, practices and relationships, I aim to contribute to current theoretical debates, and signal the unavoidable necessity for academia to capitalise on the solutions already devised within the creative industries. To do so, I will contextualise my ethnographies, and juxtapose fieldworks' dynamics in Syria and Bahrain

to finally argue my findings: this will allow me to start sketching the new operative framework which will eventually lead me to promote my idea of the Meta-Image for anthropological multimedia research.

### **THE HAWZAS FIELDWORKS**

I conducted both research fieldworks in 2010, from the 11<sup>th</sup> of February to the 11<sup>th</sup> of May in Syria, and from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> of October in Bahrain. I was in Syria for three months and in Bahrain for less than 2 weeks, roughly 1/6 of the time spent in Damascus: are my Bahraini findings 1/6 of those produced in Syria? If so, why? If not, to what extent could I articulate a theoretical reassessment of the notion 'fieldwork' upon my experience?

#### ***Pre-Production Strategy For The Damascus Fieldwork***

The most difficult task I have always confronted for my photographic work is the establishment of operational connections in the field.

Once decided the research issue, the Hawzas for the present context, I would have to find 'fixers' within my network to maximise the fieldwork's management and photographic activities. For the present discussion, I prefer 'fixer' to 'gatekeeper' as I came to appreciate the operational role (of 'fixing problems') she might take in the form of a translator, a former Hawza student or, even, a very cooperative seller at the bazaar. In fact, with fixer, I refer to anyone capable of supporting my research who is equally aware of the capital difference between 'saying' and 'showing' as the crucial factor for visual dynamics. As it happens, many fixers do not recognise such a dramatic difference, and when collaborating they would devote time, attention and energies to *telling* socio-cultural processes rather than *showing* them. As a photographer, I could make very little use of those moments if not to better understand social situations or to improve my personal

engagement with the research subject. However, such activities, even when they are useful or constructive, would still prove of no value for the storytelling, and I would try to delimit them within to the very early stages of my research plan.

As mentioned, despite a much better established network, I had to re-adjust my initial planning to conduct fieldwork activities in Iran and Iraq, where the most established seminaries are based, because of the political unrest in the two countries. Hence, I started searching for alternative narratives in other locations, and I negotiated with my supervisor the subject 'secondary Hawzas.'

Because of their secondary theological relevance, the seminaries of Syria and Bahrain would produce a representation of a Hawza distinct from that of the more established institutions of Iran or Iraq. However, my research was not focused on the Hawzas, but on their representation as a case study in knowledge production and dissemination. Therefore, my notions of 'anthropology' and 'ethnography' would be strategically re-designed for my task: my decision is either new or in any way innovative, as the ethnographic flexibility is epistemologically pivotal and ontologically defining for anthropology.

I fully devoted the three months leading to my trip to Damascus (January to March 2010) to define my research framework and overall aims. When contacting the Hawzas, I unequivocally, and in writing, stated how I wished to pursue the photographic exploration of the institution 'Hawza' as much as, through that, question wider paradigms on visual production and dissemination as exemplified by the legacy of 'Orientalist' communication. In my task, I consistently benefitted from the collaboration of an anthropologist who is a Muslim convert and had previously studied in Sayyeda Zaynab as part of his PhD research. After long and typically very difficult negotiations, I left for Syria with the

assurance from Alessandro, my anthropologist colleague, that all was in place: unfortunately, on my arrival I discovered that the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab would not allow either of us to do the research we had foreseen, and reduced its overall commitment to a series of interviews with Sayyed Abu Adib and the attendance of the morning and evening open classes. As a result, I had to re-start from the beginning my pre-production research.

### ***From Pre-Production To Production – Devised Strategies***

In order to confront the new conditions of my fieldwork, I recalled Marcus' recommendation to explore notions of 'cultural system' and 'representation' within wider interdisciplinary outlooks (Marcus 1998: 79-103). His suggestion for a 'multi-sited ethnography' framework proved extremely effective to construct my research: by combining diverse but still consistent and liminal elements, I could produce a richer representation of the Hawza, and explore how it might be represented.

As it is often the case, I found myself crafting my ethnography right through doing it, processing, reflecting on, and shaping it upon the daily findings I would be able to produce. By reshaping both creatively and tactically Marcus' notion for the specific conditions of my fieldwork, I would be able to slowly but attentively progress within the framework I was in. I concurrently realised the extent to which practices of signification of the Real would need to be postponed as too 'emotionally' driven by my very difficult time in Damascus. One example should suffice. The following two photographs offer a post-produced photograph and its un-post-produced version depicting a Sierra Leone refugee from the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab in Syria (see below for a more detailed account).





*mafu\_20100317\_0056. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*



*mafu\_20100317\_0056. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

The difference between the two is unquestionable, as the original file has been severely post-produced and overall darkened. I appreciated the shot from the very beginning: I

post-produced the file to improve it aesthetically by under-exposing it rather than partially lifting up the luminosity. I then included it in my selection to discover that it would not be much appreciated by my audiences; while discussing the reasons I would also fail to understand how limited was the photograph's contribution to the whole essay. When I did, I realise that *my* rationale for its inclusion depended largely on *my* very personal experience with the portrayed subject, and, as I will detail below, on the importance of that night *for me*: aesthetics is what *un-consciously* signified my own experience, and, upon that, the whole image. I wanted to signification of the Real to question these issues alongside the specific concerns of the research subject.

### FRAMING IDENTITIES

In ethnographic practice to cross the boundaries between the 'researcher' and the 'researched' is a much-contested field, as it is for cultural notions of involved identities. For instance, I would be endlessly asked whether I was Muslim or 'when,' and not 'whether,' I intended to convert to Islam. Considering how delicate and central the issue was, I would have to produce a very 'diplomatic' answer, balancing between their expectations and the truth. I never considered lying, and always stated my identity as a 'not-Muslim' who, nevertheless, is not indifferent to the Muslim world.

However, the identity issue would not be solved that easily. Even though the Hawzas are thoroughly inscribed by an unequivocal 'Muslim' context, seminaries could be further classified through the tag of being 'Shi'a,' 'fully religiously connoted,' and, among other concurrent possibilities, as representatives of a 'Shi'a minority within a Sunni majority.' Because of all these components, *my* identity proved central to the contextualisation of my engagement in the fieldwork and to how I could approach the Hawzas for the signification of the Real.

## ***Framing Myself***

I am a 41-year-old white man, with long straight brownish (and white) hair. I am 191 centimetres tall, and, in spite of my Italian origins, I turn red after half an hour in the sun. To what extent could I meld within the environment of the Hawza? How could I even aspire to do so in a socio-political enclave which is constantly monitored by the Government and, from time to time, by competing political entities such as, among many others, the Hezbollah? How many chances would I have of even pretending to be part of that social space? Eventually, even if it were true, how much would I be believed if I declared myself a Muslim?

Working for more than fifteen years as a researcher in the Muslim world, of which almost ten as a photojournalist, I have progressively realised that the most effective tactic to pursue my fieldwork is to *aware* play with my identities, instead of trying to 'convert' my appearance for the specific settings. For many years I had very short, if not shaved, hair, and, in spite of my belly, I would be constantly perceived as a military person. Also, particularly in my first experiences, I would try to dress as much as possible in the local manner without, eventually, stimulating any particular welcoming feeling. I then came to prefer dressing up as a 'Westerner' rather than pretending an artificial belonging to the social space I was in: when in doubt between a *shalvar kamiz* or a long-sleeve shirt in Karachi I would choose the latter over the former. In fact, regardless of any camera or dressing code, I constantly attract attention, and I have discovered that I am much more effective in negotiating spaces of active and constructing exchange by making my presence truly explicit.

Such an attitude might partly contradict established ethnographic approaches to the *milieu* (for an account of the magnitude of the possibilities: Emerson, Fretz et al. 1995), but I

have discovered that, particularly when I photograph, it works much better *for me*. In fact, a photographer not only is often believed to steal souls, but always to be a spy, and this is particularly true of a photographer in the Muslim world. The long legacy of artists and reporters with second aims has turned a long-believed rumour into an established trope across all Muslim settings largely contributing to the establishment of a large body of conspiracy theories (among many: Gray 2010).

Concurrently, I have first-hand witnessed how relations between ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’ have changed: when I first travelled to Baghdad in 1994 I would be very welcomed as ‘Italian’ and, on top of that, ‘Catholic.’ Over the last years, I have experienced a progressive deterioration of the situation in which I would not be an heir of the Italian Renaissance and an *Ahl Al Kitab* (People from the Book) fellow, but a participant, even if unwilling, to Mr Berlusconi’s ‘Bunga Bunga’ sessions. At the same time, recent misunderstandings between the Roman Catholic Church and the Muslim world have problematized the other identity trait through which I would be identified: my overall socio-cultural renegotiation *within a Muslim setting* would require a full rethinking.

Furthermore, the confrontational stance between the so-called ‘West’ and ‘Islam’ has deepened dramatically following the 9/11 events, and this has proved of crucial relevance for fieldwork research. In such regards, I have looked with interest to Edkins’ notes on “trauma time” as opposed to “linear time,” and suggested its appreciation within post-9/11 collective gazes on Islam. In recent collaborations, and particularly for my work on the Hawzas, I have experienced the extent to which 9/11 has changed both ‘worlds’ and transformed cultural engagement with Islam as mainly, if not solely, a traumatic experience.

As Edkins argues, traumas,

by definition, are events that are incapable of, or at the very least resist, narration or integration into linear narratives or, in other words, into homogenous linear time (Edkins 2012: 7).

As a result, processes of socio-cultural exchange are substantially altered, and result in the overall incapability (or impossibility) of dealing with the person / event in front of us without the *informing* lenses of previous expectations and projections: I am not anymore the person I am but one of its projections, which might be even fully distinct from whom I *really* am (taking 'who I really am' as an unproblematic notion). As an instance, the director of the Hawza Al-Qaim in Manama explicitly addressed me as a spy, with no attention whatsoever of how we came to meet, through which *isnad* (chain) of trusted contacts, nor, more importantly, without having ever seen me before.

Even though speaking Persian and Arabic might have reinforced the identity of the spy, I have tried to use those skills to signal a long-term commitment to understanding and participating to, and not only representing, the complexities of the Muslim world. My command of the diverse codes of politeness, including very rare forms of *ta'aruf* (standardised compliments), has crucially supported me in twisting, and sometimes even spinning, negative perceptions and confrontational projections. However, I have also realised the extent to which the traumatic dimension of today's cultural exchanges might allow only very limited adjustments to pre-arranged mental representations: to support my social engagement with the Hawzas I would then try to capitalise on the face-to-face meetings and the overall time at my disposal in the fieldwork.

## ***Framing The Hawzas***

While being one of the most challenging subject to research, *for me* the Hawzas epitomised the growing difficulties for researchers, and visual ones specifically, to conduct fieldwork activities in Muslim settings. As mentioned above, the 9/11 divide has deepened suspicions and further promoted confrontational stances. Power relations in the field are endlessly renegotiated, and anthropological research has been vetoed and delayed because of fear and suspicion with an increasing ratio and an unparalleled frequency. Furthermore, as Marranci explores in some detail, the research subject might easily google the researcher and double-check the degree of trust she might deserve (Marranci 2008: 82-87). In such a context, had I not relied on a British Academy funding to prolong my stay in Damascus, the Hawzas' tactical delaying would have easily succeeded, with no chance for me to produce my work (see below).

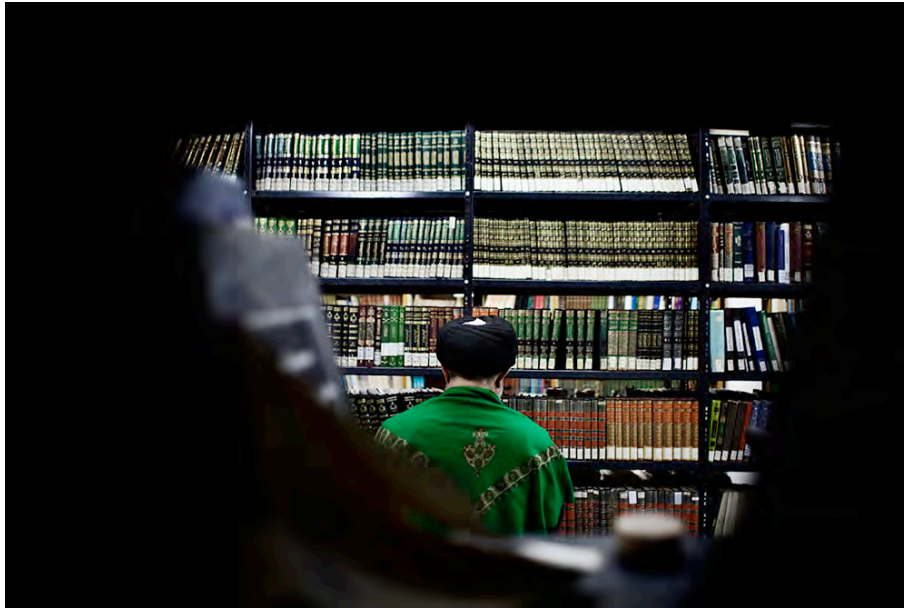
In spite of the initial agreement negotiated between the institution and Alessandro, as soon as I arrived in Damascus my permit to access the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab was withdrawn. Alessandro tried to nudge his network to allow us into the institution, but he eventually had to give up and use the ten days at his disposal to complete his round of interviews with Sayyed Abu Adib. Pondering the risk between achieving little and jeopardising a lot, I opted to avoid any un-repairable mistake and did not enter the negotiation table in Sayyeda Zaynab. I was also aware of the very little I could have added to the discussion between a student and his former instructors, and thought it was most advisable to sideline for a better occasion to approach my counter-part. Unfortunately, the negotiation's results definitively cut me out from any future collaboration with the Hawza, and I was left with no remaining option but go back to pre-production research.

Pre-production activities are usually very much constrained by time requirements: as a result, I tend to be satisfied with just one connection prior to the fieldwork and I leave the development of all further activities to the fieldwork activities. Even though this tactic is usually sufficient and very effective, its failure requires starting from scratches right in the field: this very time consuming option was exactly what I unfortunately had to confront in Damascus.

## THE HAWZAS OF DAMASCUS

### ***Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab***

My first decision was to work on a portrait of Sayyed Abu Adib who, very kindly and – I suspect - out of narcissism, quickly agreed. Besides being my best and only option at the time, this proved a first step to access the Hawza's library and be recognised within its *milieu*. It would also allow me to begin *seeing* rather than *reading about* that specific social space while searching for alternative storytelling strategies.



*Sayyeda Zaynab Library And Sayyed Abu Adib. Post-produced image photograph ©*

*Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

The Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab is a relatively closed and self-referential space in which I could not take any pro-active stance as that could have compromised the very limited access I had carved out: my only possibility was to solely capitalise on the kindness of my research subject and try to perform actively without being perceived so.

As an example, whenever I work I arrive prepared to photograph with my camera set and ready to shoot. With the Sayyed, I would wait to be in place to slowly take out my camera from the bag, switch it on and use some extra time pretending I was studying the light: this would give me the occasion to be seen and start being an object of ‘curiosity.’ In a similar manner, I would leave my camera bag around the room to somehow mark my presence in that space rather than keeping it with me for practical (i.e. changing a lens), logistical (i.e. keeping a very low profile), and safety (i.e. not having stolen it) reasons. Inside the Hawzas I felt my equipment would be absolutely safe, but I was equally willing to take the risk as I chose to use this as an instrumental tactic for my strategy.



I took photographs of Sayyed Abu Adib over two sessions, and I used every occasion to extend, protract and expand my presence there beyond agreed boundaries of time and space. While so doing, I was finally approached by a couple of students during a break in the second session and, mixing Arabic, Persian and English, we agreed we would meet later on the day. Over to a very early dinner, I introduced them to my work: I discovered a mixture of suspicion and curiosity for the Italian photographer who is not a Muslim but wishes to take photographs of the Hawza for a British Academy run project.

While continuously stating my focus to attend activities at the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab, I enquired whether they would recommend *seeing* other institutions to record differences across the Hawza network of Damascus. By clarifying my focus for a visual research, I would also use their verbal stories to understand whether and how consistently I would have to rely on a multi-sited ethnography instead of a single-sited one.

My project's initial focus targeted the representation of the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab in its academic and social activities. These would include, but not be limited to, narrative threads such as the daily life of its student and teaching bodies, their academic and recreational activities, and special religious occasions.

In the end, and despite my daily visits to all the Hawzas I was allowed to enter, I was prevented from producing a coherent portrait of the daily life of a single person from dawn to dusk and his in-between activities. The 'A day in a life' format is an established approach to photographic storytelling, and an effective way to produce an 'open' (Eco 1989b) but still structured and fully framed narrative: instead, I resorted to creating a composite 'patchwork' in which a variety of characters would together lead to a collective signification of the Real.

At this stage, I thought worthy exploring all possibilities and spend long hours walking around the mosque of Sayyeda Zaynab searching for new contacts in the time between the morning and evening classes I was welcomed to attend. However, while working to build up contacts and trust, I would keep my camera hidden in my non-photographic bag and use it only at the Hawza open classes. Eventually, within a week from Alessandro's departure, I realised the extent to which my research was deeply distrusted and could be terminated at any time.

### ***The Sierra Leone Mu'allim***

This is what happened a month's later when a Sierra Leone *mu'allim* came straight up to me after an evening class and suggested I would do a story on him: for a few days I believed my problems had been solved. However, at our appointment, he immediately started to criticise Assad's government in a very open manner, both on the streets and in his home, talking quite loudly in English even when around the local police station (March the 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010). I immediately became very suspicious of his intentions, and I began answering his comments as vaguely and politely I could. At the same time, I could not leave abruptly as that would have raised suspicions and, had I misread the whole situation, ruined a valid fixer because of impoliteness. The evening was lost over chitchatting without being allowed to shoot more than a few pictures.

I was scheduled to come back to the Hawza on the following Saturday, but during the weekend I was informed that my future arrangements had been cancelled for my own protection. I was told the Hawza was in very serious danger as a "group of terrorists had requested a ransom of one million USD for the kidnapping of the local butcher" (Hassan 2010a). The seemingly apparent absurdity of the statement to terminate our relationship would only confirm the magnitude of the Hawza's distress in having me around: the Hawza

could not forbid me to attend the classes because of their codes of behaviour but they would discourage my activities by making them as difficult as possible. When their delaying tactics failed as I would not give up for any reason, they finally served me with an un-negotiable termination notice: I would no longer be welcomed in the area as they would not be able to guarantee my safety, even though I never required such a commitment. I waited three weeks before getting back in touch with my fixers at Sayyeda Zaynab. When I enquired about the Sierra Leone *mu'allim* I did not receive any answer, and my calls to his mobile went all unanswered.

### ***Hawza Al-Qaim***

Luckily, before the Sierra Leone event, I was put in contact with Sheikh Hassan, a former student of the Hawza Al-Qaim who attended both the Damascus and the Manama seminaries. After long explanations, and through the intercession of a series of trusted friends and of our PhD supervisor, he very happily put me in contact with a friend of his to discuss the terms of my access to the Hawza Al-Qaim of Damascus. Both Hassan and Ali-Reza, his contact at the institution, proved enthusiastic of my planned activities, but I would have to wait for the official permit from the Director. I was invited to remain optimistic, as the Director was a very open-minded young Yemenite who should have been eager to use my work to promote his institution.

Unfortunately, the Director was continuously travelling and scheduling a meeting proved very difficult. After long delays, we met and I illustrated my planned photoreportage, the rationale of my research, my intended aims, and showed him a few of the pictures I had produced at the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab. I am convinced that he fully understood my research, and was truly interested in helping me, a feeling that I had not previously experienced with any of my other contacts: he allowed me to start getting involved in the

Hawza's activities *outside* the classes and this is how I developed my research on the Hawza's courtyard. However, basically at the same time of the Sierra Leone's incident, the Board of Directors at the Hawza Al-Qaim preferred to avoid any possible problem by not granting me any access to the *private* spaces of the seminary. Most probably, as the tension in the area was growing, they got both suspicious and worried, opting for a lower profile, and distancing from a non-Muslim foreigner. Hence, the photographic contribution of the Hawza Al-Qaim was limited to a few students' portraits and scenes from the Hawza's courtyard.

### ***The Sayyeda Ruqayya School***

The third space I managed to access in Damascus was the school of Sayyeda Ruqayya. This institution is a 'school' and not a 'seminary,' and it is the only structure located right in the heart of old Damascus. Because of its geography, it is fully separated from all the other seminaries in Sayyeda Zaynab; also, because of statutory regulations, it is not considered a 'proper' Hawza in spite of their almost identical curricula (Cancian in Cancian and Fusari *forthcoming*). However, I considered its inclusion with my PhD supervisor and Alessandro supported the case during our common fieldwork for the British Academy project. The rationale for our choice is of secondary relevance within the terms of the present research framework, and I leave its proper argumentation to another context (Cancian in Cancian and Fusari *forthcoming*): overall, Sayyeda Ruqayya proved valuable to add a new sub-story to the visual research on the representation of the Hawzas.

I met the School's director through Alessandro. While being welcomed very warmly he would only allow me full entrance to the public spaces of the institution, such as the mosque's courtyard, with no access to the school itself. In spite of any plea to attend

classes and daily practices within the school, I found myself once more deprived of the possibility to develop a single consistent narrative.

Previous to my engagement with the Sayyeda Ruqayya school, I had no opportunity to explore the subject of the mosque, which is a crucial and fully consistent part of the Hawza life networking activities. Its defining role is common to Sayyeda Ruqayya as much as to Sayyeda Zaynab or any other Hawza. Apparently, it might have been easier to access the mosque of Sayyeda Zaynab, which is fully networked with the surrounding Hawzas: however, this was not the case as the sanctified space of the whole area would make impossible for me to photograph freely. I eventually resorted to develop the issue 'networked mosque' through the school of Sayyeda Ruqayya and added this sub-narrative to my multi-sited research framework.

### ***The Hawzas of Damascus - Pending Issues***

Arguably, there is no reason whatsoever why the Hawzas should welcome my research and allow me into their private socio-political spaces. The tension growing both in Syria and Bahrain between the Shi'a and Sunni communities was starting to become explicit. I do not belong to the community, I bear all the signs of the spy and, precisely because I do not look like a spy, I might perfectly eligible to be one: hence, regardless of the many high-rank references I had, I still could not be trusted.

I initially assumed this rejection was based upon my non-Muslim identity. I came to question my ideas when Alessandro, who is a long-time converted Muslim, was refused the right to carry out fieldwork research (with no camera!) in the same Hawza where he had studied a decade earlier. As a consequence, the rationale I first identified for the Hawzas' policies of public engagement needed to be rethought: instead of religious affiliations, might it be possible to identify alternative reasons, such as ethnic provenience

or academic affiliations, or, simply, fear and mistrust? Would these reasons come together to motivate specific practices of engagement to preserve the sanctified dimension of the institution? Might the traumatic dimension of the confrontation between the 'West' and 'Islam' have played a role? Finally, to what extent could the visual dimension of my research affect relationships of trust? Might *they* feel dispossessed of their agency because of my photographic medium?

I gathered how Hawzas' policies of engagement might be the result of many different and, still to me, wholly unknown causalities. As much as the initial mistrust I suffered in Bahrain (see below) might have been fully motivated by the underlying civil war, so the reasons for my difficulties in Damascus might never be clearly identified. Even if I inquired about the issue, codes of politeness would prevent the Hawzas' participants to even acknowledge the problem. Hence, I can only speculate and suggest how practical reasons might have equally motivated the behaviour: having an external figure interfering with the classes is highly disruptive, as not only students might be distracted, but they might be distracted to 'perform' in front of the camera. The Hawza is not only a private space, but also a thoroughly 'sanctified' one: accepting me within their premises might have compromised the implicit religious quality of the institution and of their activities too, as I could interfere, if not break, symbolic and emotional chains of relations and beliefs. Could any social acknowledgement compensate these two dynamics? Also, how useful might have been for a minority group the social recognition I could have brought?

My acceptance at the Hawza Al-Qaim of Manama and the rejection within the network of the Hawzas of Sayyeda Zaynab might illustrate the extent to which the two grounds carry two different sacred qualities. In such a context, the un-expected rejection I experienced at the Hawza Al-Qaim of Damascus might be taken as an example of negotiated politics: the initial acceptance and the following abrupt closure of the relationship might signal the

extent to which the trans-national dimension of the Al-Qaim Hawzas' network clashed with the localised dynamics of Sayyeda Zaynab. In such a context, my final acceptance at the Hawza Al-Qaim in Manama might hint at how the Al-Qaim network could negotiate their policies of engagement *differently* upon the distinct sacrality of the local seminaries.

Finally, a case might be made for the extent to which my 'otherness' from the social *milieu* of the Hawzas might have impacted the research's dynamics. I got the impression, never explored in direct talks with the institution, that my prolonged presence might have undermined my research. I got the feeling that the Hawzas would have expected (surely preferred) a short engagement in the area on the model of Alessandro's staying for two weeks, even though I repeatedly stated that, in line with established ethnographic practice, anthropologists remain for longer lengths of time to add depth to their work. Alessandro's interviews with Sayyed Abu Abid allowed him to bring back his piece of research, largely capitalising on the chosen medium: as much as he could conduct his interviews in both formal and informal settings, for instance, by asking his questions over a conversation in a restaurant, I would be very much constrained by the specifics of the photographic camera. In fact, no one would dare question a conversation in a restaurant, but many would object to Hassan posing for me while smoking a *shisha* (water pipe) at a restaurant (see case study below).

Arguably, the socially integrated *milieu* of the area of Sayyeda Zaynab as coupled with the presence of - mainly - poor Iranian pilgrims would continuously reinforce my explicit otherness to the area. The contrary might have happened for Sayyeda Ruqayya where daily groups of tourists would browse the extremely lively area of the old city. Switching identities by changing clothes and attitudes would prove more dangerous and suspicious as I was followed most of the time: my behaviour would have only confirmed any worst suspicion. I came to consider how a very short and intense, even abrupt, fieldwork

engagement with very reduced ethical concerns on what to shoot and when to ask permission (see below) could have proven more successful: unfortunately, there is no way to explore the alternative in reality and such an approach is contrary to either ethics in photojournalism or anthropology. At the end, I found myself with a few un-developed fragments of the Real, the mosque, the class, social moments, and so on, which I could coherently signify only through the signification of the representation. The possibility of a multi-sited ethnography proved pivotal for the development of my visual narrative: 'constructing' the visual storytelling by joining the signification of the Real with that of the representation became the only way to articulate my intended communication.

### **THE HAWZA AL-QAIM OF MANAMA**

Sheikh Hassan arranged for me a fieldwork opportunity at his Hawza in Manama for October 2010. At first I was doubtful whether to accept as I was recovering from a bad accident and I had a serious limp. Also, memories of the frustrating and rather disappointing experience in Syria were still lingering. I discussed with Sheikh Hassan the possibility to delay my trip: the growing tension between the Bahraini Sunni and Shi'a communities and the incoming celebrations for *Ashura* convinced me to leave in three days.

Because of restrictions on a longer visa, I got a two-week tourist visa directly at the airport, and that became my only opportunity to conduct the research: either that or nothing. I chose a low public profile even though as a tourist in Bahrain I would definitively have more freedom than in Syria. However, as much as the issue in Syria could be one of safety for me, in Bahrain it would be of safety for my research subject. Without detailing too long the socio-political context of contemporary Bahrain and the long underlying clashes between the Sunni and Shi'a communities, any mistake I did could retaliate



against my research community: I set this consideration as equally pivotal to my research focus.

I planned my Bahraini narrative to focus on the daily activities both inside and outside the Hawza as their combined product was intended to provide audiences with a less traumatic and rounder experience of the Muslim world. To research the Hawza within its private space proved difficult in an environment both suspicious and, from time to time, quite unfriendly, particularly among the most established figures. The fundamental support of Sheikh Hassan allowed me to overcome the rather confrontational reception I received from the Head of the institution, Sayyed Muhammad Al-Alawi. I met him at the end of three days of un-answered phone calls: once done with the ritual of the *ta'aruf*, he quite abruptly confessed to me he believed all Westerners to be spies whose only aim was "the progressive socio-cultural and political occupation of the Muslim world" (Al-Alawi 2010). Such an explicit judgement made me very uneasy, and I needed to recall my twenty years of engagement with the Shi'a community to argue my thorough commitment. Realising the little effect of my plea, I reminded the Sayyed of the arrangement we had previously negotiated through his former student, Sheikh Hassan. I also mentioned how I had travelled to Bahrain in spite of the limp derived from a recent accident: the two arguments together led him to hold to the terms of the negotiated agreement, even though he would merely permit it without facilitating it. Eventually, the reduced length of my Bahraini ethnography proved useful to test the issue of how a shortened fieldwork might be more successful of a longer one: sometimes, less might be more.

Over the twelve days in which I conducted my research, the senior ranks of the institution were rather uncooperative overall while the younger generations supported me very heartily. Their behaviour attested what the Sayyed's assistant, Sheikh Jafar, had whispered to me at our introductory meeting on how the Sayyed's distrust was solely his.

However, because of time constraints, I never had the opportunity to understand whether the Sayyed's confrontational stance was the result of previous personal experiences, a sign of the growing discomfort the Shi'a community was experiencing in Bahrain, or, eventually, just a generational divide.

I had planned to focus on the private space of the seminary's classes for the first week to then follow a few characters in their life outside the Hawza for the remaining time. The negotiations for the second part proved to be even more complicated than those addressing daily activities inside the Hawza: when I was about to give up, I was approached by Ahmad who offered himself as a subject for my research outside the institution. We spent some time together and he took me to the university where he was completing his education in literature.



*mafu\_20101027\_0166. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

Other younger figures agreed to take me around, even though – I would argue – more as a gesture of hospitality than of interest in my work. The theme of the separation between

personal and public spaces in the Muslim world was fully restated as I never managed to depict the Hawza members' private lives. As an example, Sheikh Muhammad agreed to be photographed only after the Head of the Hawza, Sayyed Al-Alawi, had urged him so, and in spite of the time we had spent together back and forth to the Hawza.



*mafu\_20101027\_0260. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

As the image suggests, he took me to his apartment where – I argue - he *interpreted* the character of the ‘*alim* (knowledgeable) as he thought that to be what I wanted. In such a manner, he would complete his task as soon as possible, and get back to his family life without further delays. The episode led me to question the extent to which posing could be managed within processes of signification of the Real: should I consider ‘interpreting’ as ‘faking’? In such a context, how relevant ‘posing’ might be in the relation between the Real and its representation? If the representation shows perfectly well what would happen if I were not there with my camera, should I still discharge it as ‘artificial’? Eventually, how and to what extent can I access what would have happened, in which manner and within

which settings, if not by reference to my developed understanding of the socio-cultural space?

### ***Sheikh Jafar***

Sheikh Jafar was one of the students with whom I spent more time at the Hawza Al-Qaim of Manama, but he would very politely postpone all my requests for a portrait. On the very last day, rather unexpectedly, he reminded me of the issue and invited me to take his photograph.



*mafu\_20101027\_0095. Sheikh Jafar posing. Un-post-produced series © Massimiliano Fusari /*

*Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20101027\_0100. Sheikh Jafar posing. Un-post-produced series © Massimiliano Fusari /  
Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20101027\_0105. Sheikh Jafar posing. Un-post-produced series © Massimiliano Fusari /  
Massimedia.*





*mafu\_20101027\_0109. Sheikh Jafar posing. Un-post-produced series © Massimiliano Fusari /  
Massimedia.*

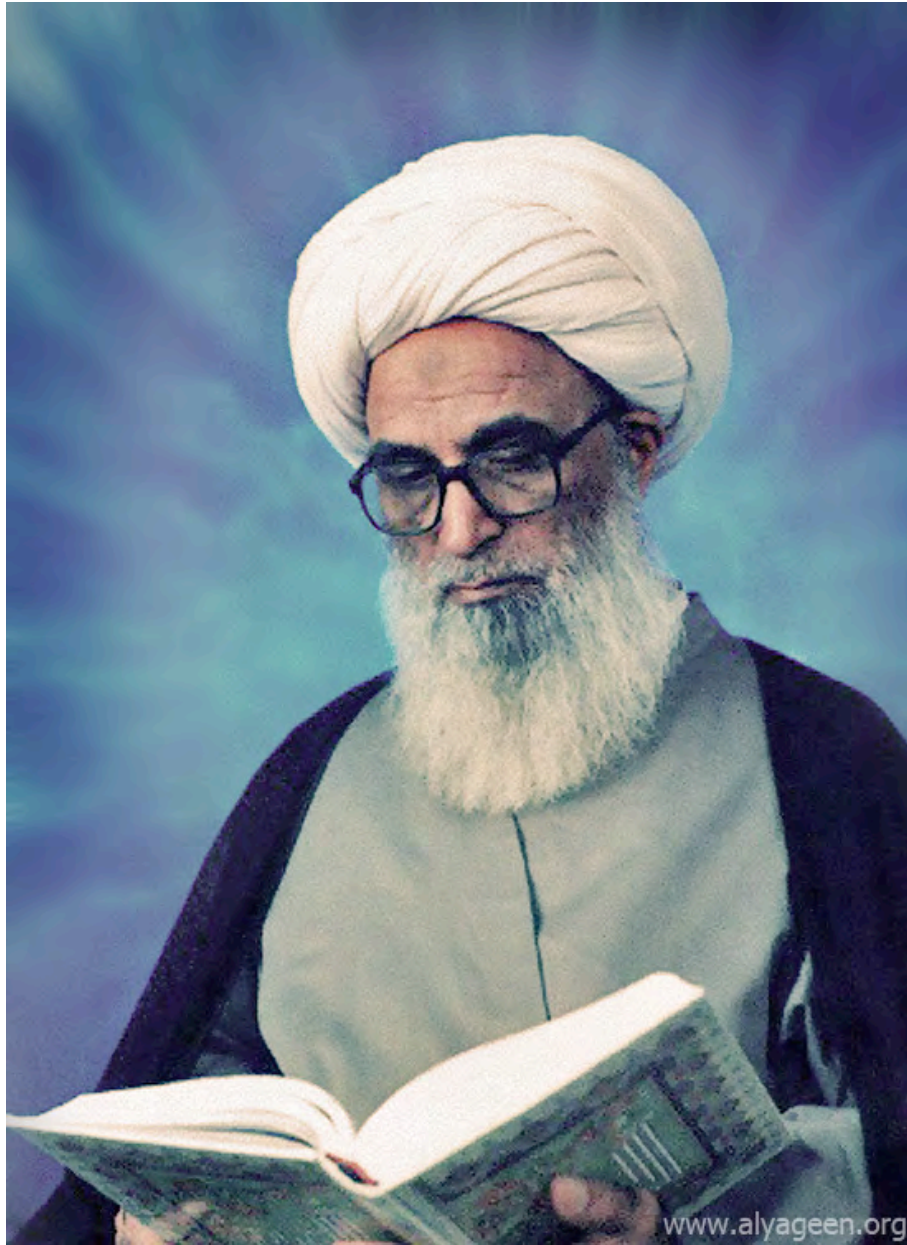


*mafu\_20101027\_0111. Sheikh Jafar posing. Un-post-produced series © Massimiliano Fusari /  
Massimedia.*

The above five images record the very short session for the portrait of Sheikh Jafar. We discussed very briefly where and how I could shoot his portrait, and the only place he would agree on was a corner in the prayer room. The setting was rather small and with very little light, but he insisted on that as the only place where he would feel comfortable. Likewise, he insisted on adopting the posture present in all the images above and would not assume any different one: was he 'performing,' 'posing,' 'interpreting,' 'faking' or what? He eventually agreed on moving enough to have the vertical columns as his background: I had suggested the change to increase the amount of available light while filling the space with some details. I equally used the *misbaha* (the prayer beads) on one column as an extra informative element, and inscribed the frame upon a diagonal composition to add some movement to an otherwise rather static shot (see mafu\_20101027\_0111).

The portrait session proved to be a clash between diverse aesthetic and semantic concerns. After the session, Sheikh Jafar clarified that he was only interested in keeping some sort of recorded memory of our time together in Bahrain. Instead, I was aiming to aesthetically frame a *visually* dull space to *visually* engage audiences to arrange processes of intended signification: he was interested in a proof of our time together, I in a medium to open up a public space of discussion for a diverse appraisal of the Hawza.

As Sheikh Jafar insisted on having his portrait taken frontally while pondering with a Qur'an in his hands, I interpreted his request as a desire to participate and further contribute to the visual imagery inscribed by the archetype of the Muslim '*alim*' as seen in the images below.



Source: [www.alyageen.org](http://www.alyageen.org).





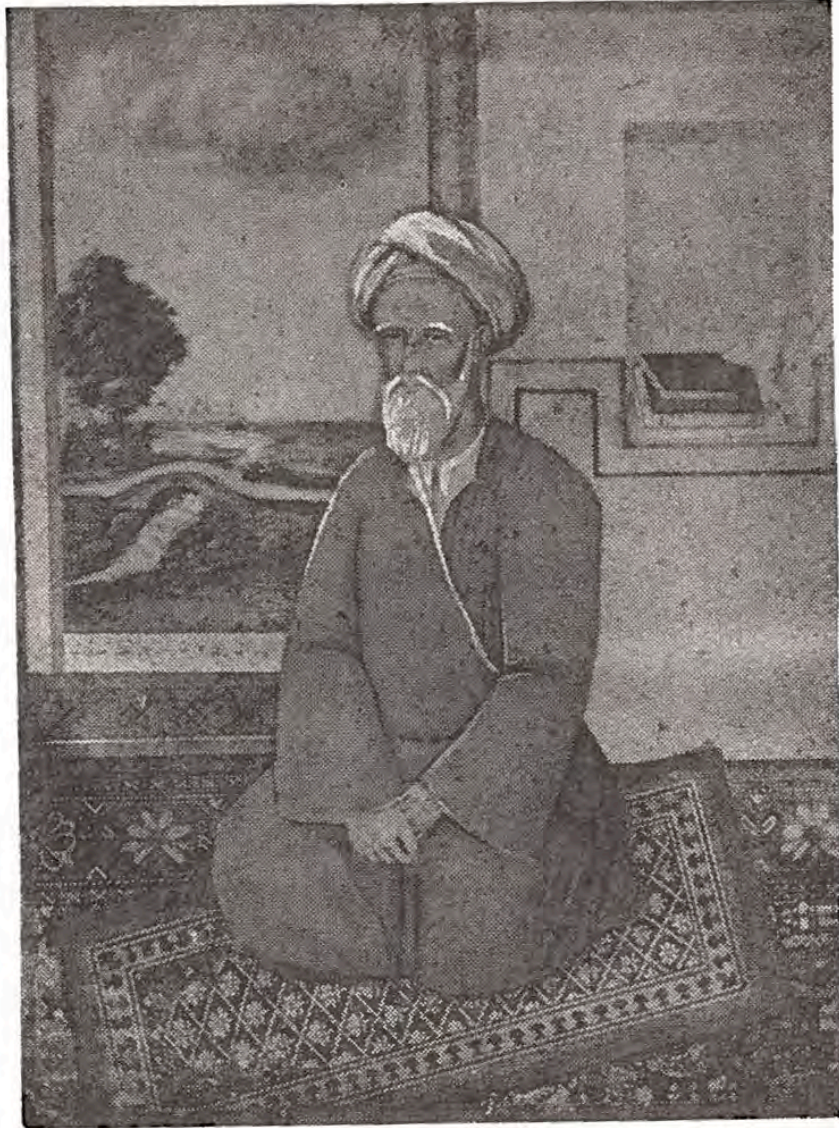
Source: [www.alyageen.org](http://www.alyageen.org).



Source: [www.alyageen.org](http://www.alyageen.org).

The issue proved, once more, to be one of colliding expectations and identities definitions. On one side, Sheikh Jafar wished to inscribe himself within the terms of an established frame of visual signs and references: by relying on a clear semantics for which the representation would be unequivocally Real, he wanted to comply with the whole *isnad* of past representations which have consistently informed his imagery of how the *'alim* should

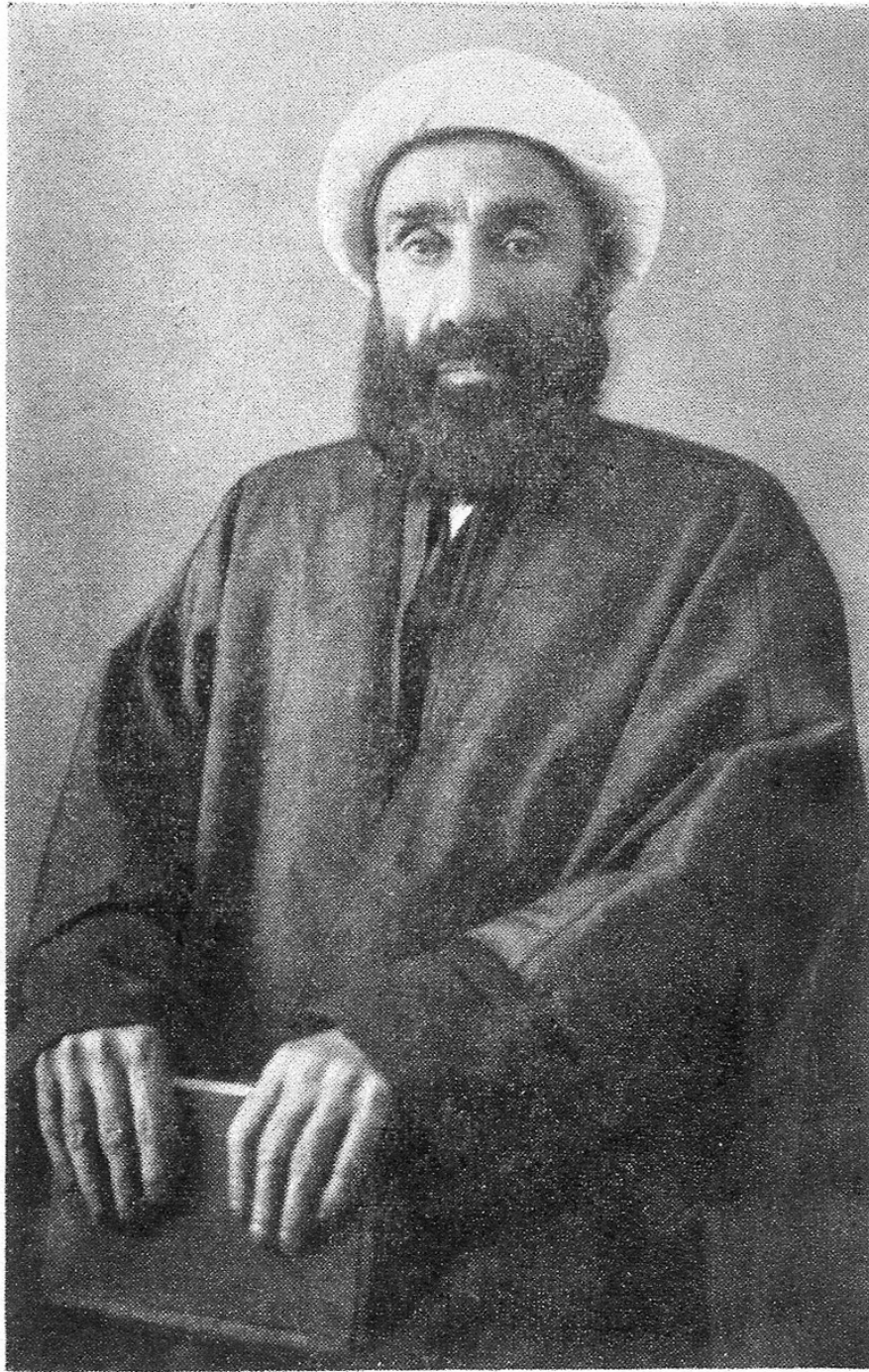
be, and *thus* be represented. Could the following two portraits be appreciated as some sort of original visual matrix?



عکس شیخ احمد احسائی - ۷

(Mudarris 1970).





(Mudarris 1970).

Arguably, he felt more of an *'alim* if he visually complied with such a code of representation: he wished to belong to a community *because of* and *through* the photographic sign certifying that he looked like an *'alim* and consequently was one. Would

he be able to look at and perceive himself any differently? Isn't this the challenge every portrait carries? Eventually, and I will explore the issue in the following chapter on the signification of the representation, what frame of expectations would audiences arrange on this portrait?

At the end, I preferred to actively translate his set of references and imageries into form and content which would appeal to different social settings and diverse audiences: I needed to arrange not only a 'plausible' but a thoroughly 'believable' relationship between the Real and its representation, and, to achieve that, I could only rely on aesthetics. Because of the juxtaposition between contrasting needs and requirements, I have been questioning my agency as a photographer who would intrude and engage a rather secluded personal and social context.

The complex maze of today's multifaceted and highly articulated identities has serious consequences for the visual ethnographer, as the traditional juxtaposition between the cultural *inside* and its *outside* is no longer clearly identifiable. Even though I am not a Muslim, I share and engage with a wide array of traits defining the socio-religious space of the Hawza; in the same manner, many other cultural elements are truly alien to me. This is not at all a new situation within ethnographic research (among many: Tapper 1998), but current processes of globalisation have developed the unfixed quality of cultural system to an unprecedented degree.

Ultimately, I have been wondering whether I should have passively complied with Sheikh Jafar's desired imagery. Had I accepted the role of witness of the Real as presented to me, I would have refrained from trying to aesthetically re-contextualise his world. However, I chose to actively arrange aesthetics and articulate my own translation of his cultural semantics: by actively engaging the Real and (upon that) its representation, I

might be seen falsifying the scene in the same way I was accused to have done for the *Time Management* case (see below).

It appears to me that the relation between the Real and its representation encompasses four different contexts, namely the frame of reference of the recorded subject, the cultural consistency of the settings, the frame of reference of the photographer, and, finally, the 'believable' quality of the final representation: in due course I will foster my Meta-Image paradigm as a tool to manage these elements. For the present context, I only wish to restate my notion of documentary as a style, that is, an epistemological approach of concerned understanding to the signification of the Real. As a result, I am interested in processing socio-cultural dynamics in a way which is aesthetically informed and thoroughly consistent with the subject's background: if the visual component is not fully pursued, the risk of a disengaging representation becomes rather probable and its public impact gets dramatically reduced, if not entirely lost. For instance, had I shot Sheikh Jafar's portrait with a pile of white plastic chairs in the background I would have lost the engaging possibilities of an aesthetically driven communication as 'ugly' or 'confusing' photographs are too easily skipped.

This is the reason why I intend to foster a visual research which is consistently imbued of aesthetics, and uses verisimilitude as a tactic to overcome the realist paradigm (see further below). The distinction between staged and fictional photography is thus demoted as the photographer has the liberty to re-arrange details of the story provided the sign is not 'falsified.' I remain aware of the extent to which the framework I have just suggested implicitly reaffirms a dramatic amount of extremely ambiguous categories: assessing verisimilitude as an *operative* tactic to depict the Real might be insufficient as un-fictionalised representations are sustainable only as long as the photographer pursues the highest levels of ethical commitment.

### ***The Verisimilitude Option – A Framework***

Sheikh Jafar's case study epitomises the extremely narrow line separating 'staged' from 'arranged' photography, as both the Sheikh and myself were aware of the recording process. Simultaneously, we were both pursuing distinct and very diverse policies of signification of the Real because of different aesthetic paradigms: my main concern was the production of an aesthetically appealing and semantically verisimilar image to reach over audiences. The Sheikh was interested in being represented consistently with the established figurative tradition of the religious experts, as both a bearer of and participant to such semantics.

The whole history of photojournalism is a search for translations of the Real into its representation. Such an issue has been inscribing the ontology of the medium from its inception, as photography has been understood (and later believed to provide) the perfect copy of Mother Nature (Baudelaire 1992). Smargiassi (Smargiassi 2009) has been detailing the diachronic development of such a relation alongside more detailed cultural histories of the medium (Warner-Marien 2010) and of photojournalism (Panzer 2005). Because of the overwhelming relevance of its post-production activities, the digital has finally exposed the realist paradigm and invited the usage of the category of likeness or, more precisely, verisimilitude.

According to Pearson and Simpson, the term indicates "a *plausible* or *believable* relationship [that] exists between a text and its referent in the world of experience" (Pearson and Simpson 2001: 641-642, emphasis added). Hence, verisimilitude refers respectively to both the quantitative and qualitative dimension of resemblance, as its signifier has to look enough like it to be plausible, and its quality relevant enough to appear believable. It concurrently suggests how such a relationship needs to be validated by

audiences who are the ultimate agency ruling on whether a representation is verisimilar, regardless of any intended or asserted likeness: hence, my approach to the photograph as the result of the signification of both the Real *and* the representation. As argued, verisimilitude needs both a quantitative and a qualitative appreciation: to what extent could different significations of the Real and, accordingly, of its representations, alter interpretive patterns overall? The issue is clearly two-fold: on one side there is the relation of the representation *to* the Real, on the other the audiences' understanding of the representation as Real.

In my years as a media producer, I have further refined my stance towards the issue of verisimilitude as one of harmonious consistency with the context. By that I mean to state that it necessitates being culturally consistent, that is, the photographer has to arrange a plausible relationship using her developed ethnographic sensitivity to decode the anthropological context she is in. Also, such a consistency is required to be harmonious not only with the Real but with audiences too, as otherwise its visual quality would be negatively affected to the point of becoming 'un-believable.' I am aware of how the slippery concept I have just introduced can equally suggest (and eventually lead to) ineffective communication if unethically pursued; this is already the case for much of current media, and I will specifically address the issue in the final chapter.

Eventually, the relation between ethics and aesthetics proves dramatically pivotal, as representing the 'un-known' might fall for long-term established perspectives, prior imageries and the fully 'un-real' and 'dis-joined' narratives which might affect even the most skilled anthropologist (Marranci 2008: 142). As Eco recognises, to describe the un-known is always a problematic enterprise in which it remains hard "not to allegorise nor moralise [but simply] record" (Eco 2001: 66, my translation). Using the TV popularization of Marco Polo's novel *Il Milione* as a case-study, Eco acknowledges how Polo found a



shared (with his audiences) representational space to picture what he was the first to witness and others needed to imagine upon his account. The present work suggests aesthetics as the tool to articulate *that* signifying space of translation, and the Meta-Image as its comprehensive communicative paradigm. Despite my focus on intended significations only, I remain aware of the crucial role audiences have, and I will approach the issue solely within a qualitative framework to question the extent to which communication might 'succeed.'

### **COMPARING FIELDWORK DYNAMICS**

I have long pondered the results of my work experiences in Syria and Bahrain. I have done so to specifically assess ethnographic practice and the different dynamics of my two fieldworks. I was privileged to work on the same subject within two distinct socio-cultural contexts: a very rare case for the creative industries.

Above, I have explored issues of ethnographic engagement for a non-Muslim researcher and focused on effective and flexible tactics to build up a comprehensive strategy: my aim to integrate into the anthropological space of the Hawzas without mingling with it might not have been the most effective choice overall. However, I cannot compare my Syrian experience to my research in Bahrain for the lack of any public profile or social engagement. For instance, I would not be able to walk in any area of the city of Manama, not only for the climate, but for the ergonomics of the city too. Furthermore, the Hawza Al-Qaim of Manama arranged my transportation back and forth: at 7 AM I would be picked up in front of my house by Sheikh Muhammad to be taken straight to the Hawza where I would spend my day until the end of the classes at 2 PM. We would then drive back and I would stay with the couple of Indians hosting me. My life in Bahrain was clearly split into

two: the morning session at the Hawza and the rest of the day at home with my Indian friends.

Such a daily routine allowed me to remain a shadow in Manama and keep the lowest possible public profile: this proved a necessity for everyone, as I did not want to further endanger the extremely difficult conditions of the Shi'a community. So, my very few occasions out were, mainly, with my Indian guests and we would stay within their social network, which – incidentally – was very much sidelined. Eventually, it could be argued that my understanding of Bahrain proved overall split between my ethnographic research and developing my skills in Indian cuisine.

If the pre-requisite of ethnography is the crossing of the 'Other,' I finally wonder which socio-cultural dynamics might be best for fieldwork practice. Should I immerse fully into the community I research as I did, for instance, with the Albanian Bektashi? Should I instead keep some sort of distance and cross the 'Otherness' during office hours like I did in Syria? Should I access the Hawza within office hours while I lived a thoroughly alienated life from the social *milieu* like I did in Bahrain? Or should I live in the socio-cultural area and in full engagement with my research community *but* without any emotional sharing like I did with the Egyptian tentmakers? Is there any answer possible for the whole of these contexts? Is there any 'Muslim' specificity? If so, to what extent does fieldwork in the Muslim world differ from other case studies? To what extent should the renegotiation of identities and socio-cultural/political spaces be understood as 'fields' instead? Eventually, which tactical decisions might be preferred when choosing the length for the fieldwork? After all, can we acknowledge that ideal settings might only be idealised, and the only fieldwork foreseeable is the ever-changing one we are in? I will come back to the issue with my session on phenomenology and concentrate on the issue of the duration of the ethnography for the following section.

### ***The Fieldwork Length***

I have already underlined the relevance I attribute to the pre-production as the comprehensive arrangement of as many components as possible for the best management of the ethnography (i.e. the production). In this section, I wish to contextualise the relevance of the pre-production in relation to the fieldwork and its overall length. To do so, I will compare the quantitative results of my ethnographies in Syria and Bahrain, and argue how fieldwork's length might not be the principal means for ethnographic results: I will therefore stress the relevance of concurrent factors such as attentively prepared pre-production arrangements and a developed cultural awareness.

As mentioned before, I spent twelve weeks in Syria and two in Bahrain. I was not in charge of either preparation as I relied on Alessandro and Sheikh Hassan, with very disappointing results in the first case, and rather positive ones for the Bahraini experience. As for the present context, I am not interested in assessing what went wrong in Syria and why: these speculations are of little use for the final findings if not merely to learn from previous mistakes. In this section, I am solely interested in comparing the fieldwork durations to invite academic research to capitalise on a creative industries framework.

In Syria I shot 1,386 photographs out of a twelve weeks' fieldwork (Diagram 01 below), even though I visited the Sayyeda Ruqayya's School with the Hawzas of Sayyeda Zaynab and Al-Qaim for a total of 77 days out of my 90 days on the ground.

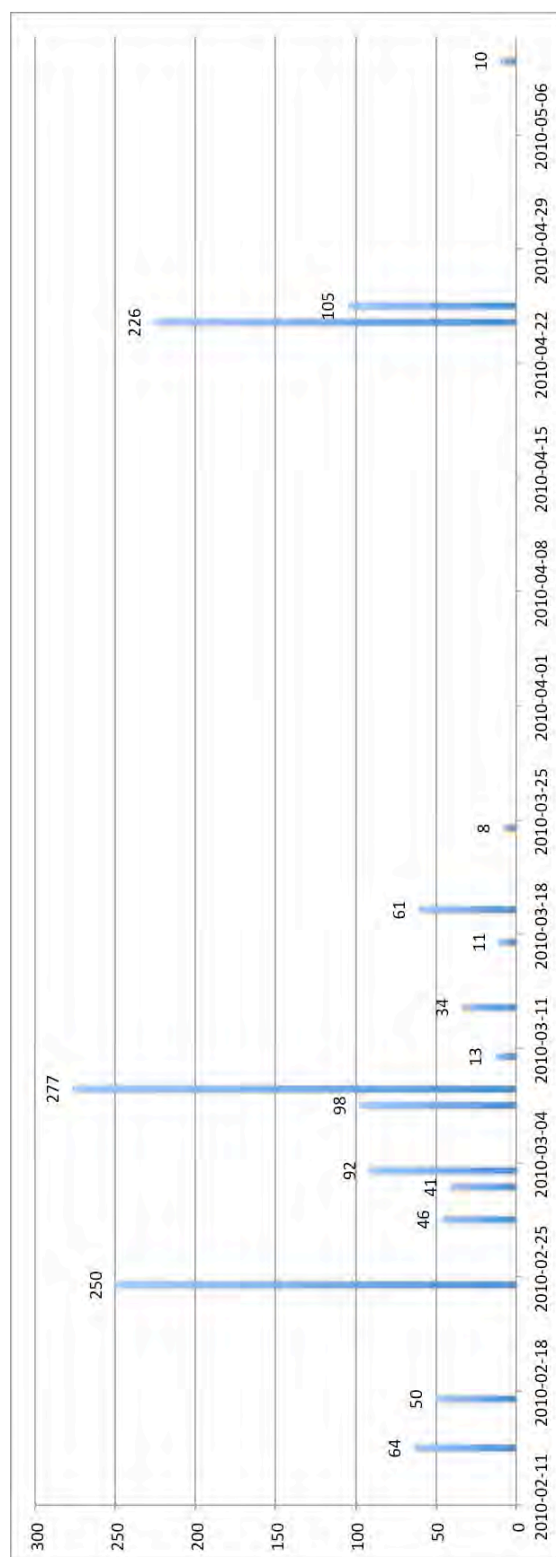


Diagram 01 – Fieldwork Production in Syria.

In Bahrain I shot a little more, exactly 1,416 photographs in less than 2 weeks of daily visits (Diagram 02 below).

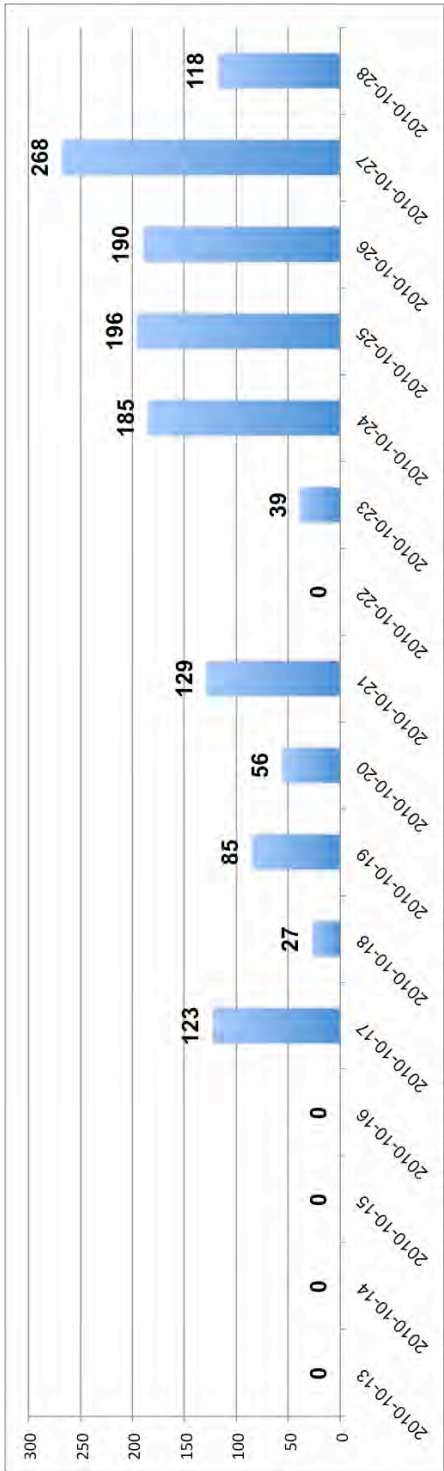


Diagram 02 – Fieldwork Production in Bahrain.

Hence, both experiences proved quantitatively pair in terms of production, and I am equally satisfied in terms of qualitative results too: my final montage (the photo essay in Annex Three of the present thesis) reflects this, as 14 images are from Syria and 12 from Bahrain, even though different ratios could have been produced for alternative contexts and editings (see the section on montage).

Out of these considerations, it appears clear how pre-production planning proved vital and, arguably, more important than any fieldwork length. Sheikh Hassan managed to efficiently secure an (almost) full access to the Hawza Al-Qaim in Manama for my ethnography. Syria proved a completely different setting in which my work would be continuously delayed to the point of almost taking me to a full nervous breakdown. One example would suffice. As I stated, I visited the Hawzas for seventy seven days out of my ninety days in Damascus, but I was allowed to photograph for sixteen days only for rough total of four combined hours: the rest of the time would be fully dispersed in endless negotiations, theological discussions and long and painful waiting. Even though I learned a great deal on Shi'a theology, I felt that those teachings did not enhance my overall understanding of the local socio-religious contexts, nor promoted any sympathetic stance as they were finalised only to delay and distract me from my mission. I spent hours first in the cold of February and March and then under the hot April and May sun waiting to be received or just accommodated into the Hawzas.

The feeling of un-desirability I continuously felt in the Damascus Hawzas was extremely uncomfortable. As a further example, I recall that the Hawzas of Sayyeda Zaynab and Al-Qaim were on the opposite side of the town where I lived and it would take me an hour to reach them. As a sign of respect, I planned my trips to arrive always 20 minutes earlier than the agreed appointment. Once it happened that, because of a large car accident, I arrived a few minutes after the appointment: in spite of any reason and the fact that they

had previously been extremely regular in their daily delays, this cost me a whole week of exile with a sermon on the value of punctuality.

I was aware that the Hawzas' code of hospitality would forbid them from explicitly rejecting me but not postponing or continuously delaying agreed engagements: I came back from Syria having gained more than 10 kg from stress. In such a context, I was somehow supported by past experiences in the area. By that I refer to how my background helped me to interpret and manage codes of manner roughly identified as 'Shi'a as shared across distinct realities such as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq. My research and work engagements in these settings were mainly, if not uniquely, in relation to the Shi'a community: I learnt to interpret and decode attitudes and behaviours in Syria *because of* my previous anthropological, social and political notes while I would come to question ethnic definitions and identity issues.

I mentioned above how a short and intense fieldwork might lead to better results overall: I raise the issue as applied to both fieldwork management and aesthetic and semantic concerns. As for the fieldwork management, the suggestion is clearly self-explanatory as a shorter fieldwork would be more feasible both in terms of budget and overall project's duration. Concurrently, findings might prove qualitatively better as the ethnographer's lens might capitalise on a more focused engagement as a result to a shorter exposure. For instance, it happened that after a month or so in Damascus I could not see anything new or anything evocative enough to be photographed. This is often the case when the photographer feels it has already shown 'everything' and might happen at different stages and in different times, a week's, a month's, and so on. As much as it came to me after a month of daily engagement in Syria, it did not show in my two weeks' fieldwork in Bahrain. Eventually, the Sierra Leone's *mu'allim* event coincided with such a moment of plenitude, and I found myself incapable of photographing not because of having shown all, but,

simply, because I would not be allowed so. The following weeks of negotiation with the other Syrian institutions re-opened my eyes and put me in condition to take full advantage of the forthcoming very rare and too short recording opportunities I was offered.

Eventually, to sum-up, my research findings have reconfirmed the long known relevance of the pre-production for ethnography, and evinced the contrasted reception longer fieldworks might receive from the research subject. This is particularly dramatic within current research on Islam as the subject 'Islam' (here assessed in a thorough un-problematized manner) is the result of highly politicised views, approaches and practices.

### SHOOTING DECISIONS

Through reference to Gardner's invitation (above in the Introduction), I have already briefly mentioned the relevance of knowing 'how to photograph' as propaedeutic for visual production and communication: but what does that *really* mean?

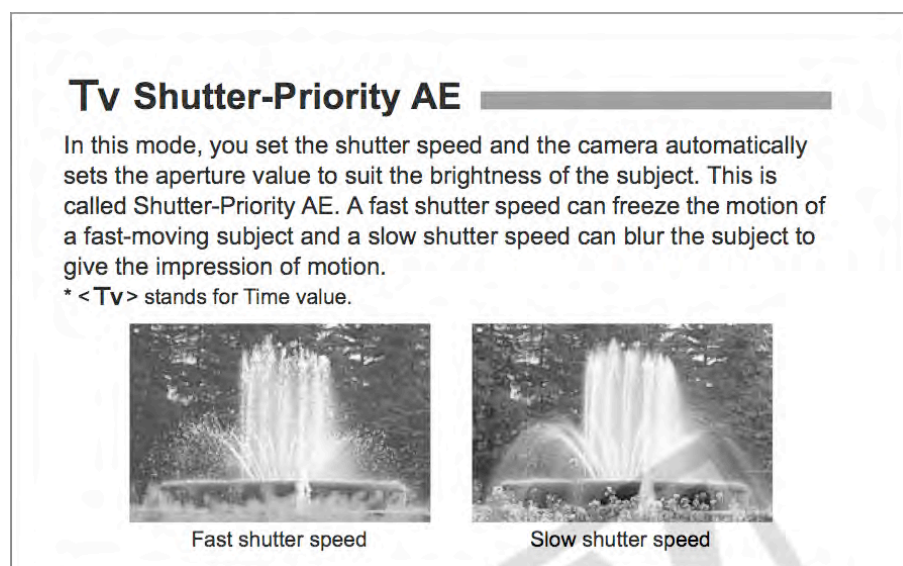
Cartier-Bresson has described photography as an activity that appears to be easy even though "it is a varied and ambiguous process in which the only common denominator among its practitioners is their instrument" (Cartier-Bresson 1999: 15). The recognised founder of photojournalism is adamant about shooting management, as he merely refers to the camera as a tool for which technique "is important only insofar as you must master it in order to *communicate* what you see" (Cartier-Bresson 1999: 38, emphasis added).

Fieldwork appears to be at the crossroad between pre-production and production practice as a temporary signification of the Real. On one side, ethnographies need to be attentively prepared, on the other, production requirements and settings change continuously and often present un-foreseeable scenarios. I will suggest how these situations might be confronted only through flexible and creative negotiations between the



fieldwork requirements and the camera communicative possibilities: I identify in 'visual education' the most effective way to handle such a complex negotiation, as it is only through the proper management of these dynamics that effective (i.e. communication) post-production can later be arranged.

I initially thought of detailing all the settings I planned for my research, but I have yet addressed only the gatekeeper/fixer issue. In this section I will try to summarise the latitude of the available (and daily increasing) communicative possibilities for digital photography to sketch the terms of a practical management of the signification of the Real. However, I will not deal with the basics of the camera, like the aperture and the shutter speed, as they are clearly explained in all instruction manuals to be comfortably read on the plane to the fieldwork.



*Shutter-speed on the Canon 5d manual (Canon 2013: 86).*

## Av Aperture-Priority AE

In this mode, you set the desired aperture and the camera sets the shutter speed automatically to suit the subject brightness. This is called aperture-priority AE. A larger aperture opening (smaller f/number) will result in a blurred background ideal for portraits. This occurs because a lower f/number decreases the depth of field (range of acceptable focus). On the other hand, a smaller aperture opening (larger f/number) will make more of the foreground and background fall within acceptable focus. A smaller aperture opening increases the depth of field.

\* <Av> stands for Aperture value.



With a large aperture opening



With a small aperture opening

*Aperture on the Canon 5d manual (Canon 2013: 88).*

## Colours

The first issue to be approached is arguably colour transmission. Colours are “properties possessed by an object of producing different sensations on the eye as a result of the way it reflects or emits light” (Webster 2013): hence, colours are thoroughly relative values, which require to be somehow ‘defined’ and ‘anchored’ as otherwise finalised communication would be un-achievable. There are several ways to *aim* to do that but the only effective one relies on its comprehensive management from pre-production throughout production and post-production.

Digital cameras are being constantly improved and present colour management features even for amateur models: I will briefly explore the settings my camera, a Canon 5D, offers and juxtapose them to those available for the same improved model, the Canon 5D mark2. Eventually, I will try to address the relevance of the subject through a few case studies out of my Syrian fieldwork.

The Canon 5D is a prosumer camera, i.e. a camera targeting an evolved photo-amateur who is not yet a professional: I bought this camera as more advanced models were out of my budget possibilities. The Canon 5D can, like all competitors, set the temperature of the light to manage its translation on a digital file; concurrently, it allows to set it on 'auto,' which is an extremely useful tactic when dealing with mixed light sources, as it happens, for instance, in internal settings of artificial light mixed with the outside. This feature proves of further utility when shooting in a RAW format as this thoroughly 'un-edited' digital file can be thoroughly fine-tuned at a post-production level: for instance a photograph shot with the setting 'tungsten light' can be later re-profiled upon a 'daylight' setting.

The series of photographs below originate from the same RAW file imported through a few of the many colour settings available: the file is still thoroughly un-processed even though it has arguably gone through crucial signifying practices. The following seven pictures are the result of the same digital file differently colour-profiled when imported into a common management software like Lightroom.



*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Colour profiled file on Lightroom with a Split tone © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Colour profiled file on Lightroom with a Blue filter © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/Massimedia.*





*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Colour profiled file on Lightroom with a Bleach bypass © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Colour profiled file on Lightroom with an Auto tone © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Colour profiled file on Lightroom with a Yesterday filter © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Colour profiled file on Lightroom with a Medium contrast curve © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Colour profiled file on Lightroom with a Medium contrast curve and a*

*Sharpen face © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

The above images reveal the extent to which any digital file is a *specific* interpretation of the colour space through which it signifies the incident light of the scene. At the same time, each computer imports the file with its embedded colour scheme, and *diversely* interprets the binary information provided by the digital file. Furthermore, the computer screen has a colour profile independent from the computer CPU: this multiplicity transforms the imported digital file into the battlefield of three distinct *informative* and *interpretative* colour spaces. As it were not already enough, the post-produced digital file will have its own colour profile, that of the post-produced file, which is then further translated for the *specific* chosen output (Web, print, screen, etcetera...). Finally, both the computer and the screen decay with the passing of time, requiring constant and frequent tunings. Hence colour, which is in itself the *relative* reflection of light on the eyes, gets 'encoded' at least five times: the camera interpretation of the incident light, its translation by the computer and the screen, its post-production and the final post-produced output

form. As a result I assess the digital photograph as a fully partial and temporary colour interpretation of a series of zeroes and ones.

The above case study exemplifies just one of the five encoding possibilities the digital file goes through from the pre-production to its post-production: clearly, the range of (daily increasing) prospects to fine-tune colour settings poses a dramatic issue of semantic consistency and overall signification: these will be discussed in the following two chapters on the signification of the representation.

One last note addresses a major improvement Canon implemented through its 5D mark2 model. Alongside the possibility to shoot up to 30 minutes of continuous moving images in a wide variety of recording formats, the camera offers comprehensive colour profiles for both still and moving images. Not only the camera CPU decodes the incidental light upon the photographer's suggestions in the form of light settings, but it allows setting the magnitude of its vibrance with the whole of its variables, from the contrast to the saturation, through a wide array of fully personable features.

### ***Languages: Colour Versus Black And White***

As long as photography used to be an analogue medium, conversion between colour and black and white could be done only from the former to the latter. Such a policy of signification has been demoted to a simple detail for digital photography, as conversion processes are immediate and very easy to accomplish both at the pre- and post-production phase. Furthermore, some photographers, and I include myself among them, prefer shooting in colour, and delay their final policy of signification (colour or black and white) to the post-production phase. I do so as digital colour photography is three times more refined than any black and white file as it captures images through three recording channels (red, green and blue) against the single one of black and white photography. It



follows that black and white pictures converted from colour files contain three times more information than the correspondent black and white file, and this should always be preferred for reasons of file quality.

Nevertheless, I am aware of the extent to which my suggestion poses a major issue for narrative consistency, as different colour spaces lead to alternative compositional strategies and, eventually, distinct communicative results (see Chapter Three and Four). However, and I come back to one of the main points of the present discussion, a visual researcher can (and very much should) learn to see beyond the frame: hence, colour choices might be easily 'corrected' through creativity while no digital file can be enhanced by adding extra pixels where none is.

After shooting in colour, I decided to post-produce my digital files in colour too, as my *intended* signification for the Hawza was one of 'realism' and 'modernity.' In the same way, had I chosen black and white over colour, connoted dimension of 'tradition' and 'past' would have informed the photo essay and suggested a more idyllic, poetic and intimate dimension. I capitalised on an audience response session at the University of Oxford for the 2010 concluding event of the British Academy project to address the extent to which post-production might not intend but *suggest and lead to* evocative understandings.

Following my presentation, I took a few questions on my choice for colour over the black and white format. A few former Hawza students from India raised the subject and we used this as an occasion to explore the role of aesthetics as semantics. I gathered that, as much as I consciously chose to rely on colour to suggest a contemporary dimension for the Hawza, they would have preferred a narrative arranged upon the evocative dimension of black and white photography. I decided the concern was definitively worthy, and I raised it with other Hawza students receiving very much the same feedback: my findings

would eventually confirm the extent to which problems of signification of the Real could clash with identity's projections and belongings.

In general, I assumed that my gaze would target mainly a 'Western audience,' which is specifically concerned with the social trauma of 9/11. At the very same time, the Hawza students applied some sort of 'Muslim gaze,' if such a thing can be posited against the very questionable idea of a 'Western gaze:' once more identities and projections restated the extent to which intended policies of signification might be easily re-arranged if not thoroughly re-signified.

### ***Framing Compositions***

Alongside the light quality and the comprehensive management of the *whole colour space* of a digital photograph, to be here addressed as the composite result of the signification of the Real with the signification of the representation, frame composition is a further crucial issue. I will address the subject by depicting the same simple scenario of Hassan smoking a shisha in seven photographs: as much as they all inform the viewer about a single activity, they arguably communicate it differently. The wide variety of possible Puncta, each conveying a diverse recording perspective, focus and overall framing, promote seven aesthetically informed significations of the Real.



*mafu\_20100310\_0001. Un-post-produced jpg file © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0002. Un-post-produced jpg file © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0003. Un-post-produced jpg file © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0004. Un-post-produced jpg file © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*





*mafu\_20100310\_0008. Un-post-produced jpg file © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0010. Un-post-produced jpg file © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100310\_0013. Un-post-produced jpg file © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

The empty space of the ‘tea-room’ where I was with Hassan also contributed to my framing as it protected it from outside interferences: for instance, had a group of Hezbollah clerics arrived, the whole scenario would have changed and informed both my recording activities and Hassan’s behaviour accordingly. Luckily, they arrived only when we were departing and Hassan was rather relieved not to be seen with me photographing. However, had the scene been populated, I would have had to include these variables within the frame, and incorporate all attending inter-subjectivities (see further below) as parts of my signification of the Real. As a result, these seven digital files can be appreciated as, at the very same time, the result of my perspective on the Hawza, my friendship with Hassan, and the very distinct socio-political context in which the images were taken: with the latter consideration, I indicate both the specific political situation in Damascus in the Spring of 2010 and the contrived physical setting in which I was working. I hope I am becoming to depict the extent to which a photograph keeps overlapping its

strict bounding frame and might require, particularly within the current quantitative booming, new ways to signify its communicative value.

### ***Bending The Frame***

The seven interpretations of Hassan's tearoom shisha are a first entry point into the subject of composition as semantics. I will rely on the following example to suggest the extent to which the photographer should actively engage her subject.

The main room of the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab has a few pillars in the middle, and, after a few visits, I realised that they were the participants' most favoured spots. Because of that, I decided I would sit either frontally to them to record micro dynamics or use the pillars as a generative Puncta to my signification of the Real.



*mafu\_20100224\_0214. Creative usage of my spatial limitations, and of the central pillar as an aesthetic component. Un-post-produced photographs © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100224\_0218. Creative usage of my spatial limitations, and of the central pillar as an aesthetic component. Un-post-produced photographs © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100224\_0248. Creative usage of my spatial limitations, and of the central pillar as an aesthetic component. Un-post-produced photographs © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



The agreement with the Hawza authorities stated that if any of the subjects of my pictures felt uncomfortable I would refrain from shooting him; this implied that I would have to make explicit whom and when I would photograph, and wait for their approval. However, the risk of loosing Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment' (Cartier-Bresson 1999: 20-43) and produce a sequence of staged photographs invited me to bend my framing. I would plan to be the first to arrive to the class, and put my equipment on show, even by holding it to remind everyone what they already knew: I was there to take photographs and I would do that as much as I could. This would further serve to invite to sit around me those more willing to interact. At the same time my camera would *explicitly* signal my location to those unsympathetic to my project and, given the Hawza's code of politeness, offer them the possibility to move elsewhere: this might be signalled as a further amplification of the disruptive figure of the ethnographer (Emerson, Fretz et al. 1995). In fact, photojournalists not only dis-articulate social spaces and codes in a manner similar to 'verbal researchers,' but stimulate an extra layer of performance because of their chosen medium.

Furthermore, the reduced mobility derived from sitting in a classroom made me attentively evaluate different recording tactics, and ponder which equipment would best suit my recording strategies. Clearly, the possibility of distracting or bothering the participants would increase with the size of the lenses I used, as bigger zoom lenses would draw more attention to my activities: I chose to rely on smaller fixed lenses to reduce as much as possible the visual impact of my presence. Also, because of their optical schemes, zoom lenses require a larger aperture or longer shooting times than any fixed lens: fixed lenses would then allow me to creatively use the depth of field and the whole of the very little available light.



*mafu\_20100224\_0256. Selective focus and depth of field. Un-post-produced photographs ©  
Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100224\_0257. Selective focus and depth of field. Un-post-produced photographs ©  
Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

Rather expectedly, my planned activities would not always be successful: for instance, classes might go deserted, as it was often the case on Saturday mornings. As a result, I would find myself confined to a corner of the room with no opportunity to move and engage the students further away from me. The idea of switching lenses and use zooms would cross my mind, but I would immediately discard it as zoom lenses would explicitly point a target: the possibility to attract negative reactions was very high.

Not knowing how long I could prolong my fieldwork, I would always aim to use what was available in one way or another, and constantly explore and develop the conditions available: instead of giving up photographing empty classes, I would try to make sense of emptiness as a storytelling evocative element, as less might prove more.



*mafu\_20100313\_0017. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

On a few occasions, the emptiness of the space allowed me the micro-movements that inscribe the series of photographs from mafu\_20100228\_0012 to mafu\_20100228\_0016: I will contextualise them to explore the subject of the selective focus.



*Examples of mafu\_20100228\_0012. Selective focusing. Un-post-produced photograph ©  
Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*Examples of mafu\_20100228\_0013. Selective focusing. Un-post-produced photograph ©  
Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*Examples of mafu\_20100228\_0014. Selective focusing. Un-post-produced photograph ©  
Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*Examples of mafu\_20100228\_0015. Selective focusing. Un-post-produced photograph ©  
Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*





*Examples of mafu\_20100228\_0016. Selective focusing. Un-post-produced photograph ©*

*Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

### ***Selecting The Focus***

Let me now compare three images in detail: mafu\_20100228\_0014, mafu\_20100228\_0015 and mafu\_20100228\_0016. As the ordering numbers suggest, the three images were shot consecutively, and this is equally clear from the limited changes in the recording perspective. The issue at stake here is the extent to which changing the recording point of view might work as semantics: as in the case above of Hassan's tearoom shisha, the three images communicate three diverse narratives upon the creative and aware use of the selective focus. In more detail, *mafu\_20100228\_0014* presents three distinct depths of field, the central one on focus with the other two slightly blurred. I was unhappy of the result as I found the walking stick on the left of the pillar rather disturbing.

As my eyes are endlessly reframing,

the photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimetre. He can modify perspectives by a slight bending of the knees. By placing the camera closer to or farther from the subject, he draws a detail (Cartier-Bresson 1999: 33).



*mafu\_20100228\_0014. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

I therefore decided to lean a little to my right and reduce the recorded planes to two: I moved the Sheikh to the left, keeping him as the central focus of the composition.



*mafu\_20100228\_0015. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

However, I 'felt' the image was unsettled, possibly unrefined, as something was slipping out of the frame on both sides. I leaned a little more and shifted the focus from the Sheikh to the row of students at the back to include one subject more: this is the signification of the Real I find more aesthetically and semantically convincing for my intended communication of the Hawza.





*mafu\_20100228\_0016. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

I have used the above sequence to signal the extent to which a different communication might be arranged upon the usage of aesthetics as a full semantic tool. I have produced a potentially much more balanced composition by arranging the same elements differently: the perspective has remained the same throughout the series, but its framing and the conscious application of the selective focus has allowed me to juggle its communicative power in different ways. Eventually, keeping in mind how less is often more, I preferred a two-plane, simpler signification of the Real. As I have already mentioned, the photograph is often wrongly assessed as the natural product of a good medium, and an expensive camera is believed to produce consistently good images. However, this is seldom the case.

By intertwining issues of aesthetics with ethnographic constraints, I aimed to address the extent to which locations might dictate specific policies of engagement and signification of the Real. When discussing my work with colleagues, I sometimes hear comments such as

“you should have moved up / down / right / left” to get the best shoot and the most effective communication. Suggestions like those are often sensible, and might suggest an opportunity for personal improvement; other times, however, they might become rather useless remarks which do not take into consideration the specific constraints of the research.

I am convinced that the visual ethnographer *must* have a propaedeutic education on visual cultures as much as an in-depth understanding of the camera and its communicative possibilities: in such a way, she will be able to best confront fieldwork limitations and articulate alternative spaces for her signification of the Real. The case of a photographer sticking to the rules dictated by the Hawza without *creatively* bending those to her advantage is a most immediate example. Working in a rather dark room would make the un-skilled photographer respond to the lack of light with a flash, by changing the ISO of her camera, or, eventually, by evaluating a different set of lenses: the first two options are to be thoroughly discouraged for their negative impact on the social space and the photograph's aesthetics. The third one would instead lead to a creative and effective engagement with the room dynamics.

As I have explored, the digital has the capability to ‘post-produce’ the RAW source file to an unprecedented extent, which is thoroughly unparalleled in film photography. As much as analogue photography allows minor and overall very limited corrections of the negative film, the digital file manages a high quantity of data: as argued, it can generate diverse files with distinct colour schemes, tone corrections and overall different light temperatures at any stage of the whole processing work. This represents one of my grounding arguments for the aware management of aesthetics as semantics, and the extent to which post-production is to be incorporated as a very *practical* communicative pivot for the digital photograph.

Without falling into assessments of ‘unreal’ or ‘virtual realities,’ today’s digital revolution has made explicit the extent to which a digital photograph is not concerned with the signification of the Real *solely*. Like in the case with new media and Internet processes of signification, epistemological shifts work much before their theoretical contextualization and complete understanding, as *praxis* precedes theory: aesthetics has unquestionably evolved into the fundamental constituent of both still and moving digital images regardless of any professional understanding. Furthermore, the increasing offer for all digital cameras to record moving images is continuously reshaping the creative decision-making and the specific practice of the signification of the Real. Arguably, signifying strategies for still images narratives are diverse from those concerned with moving images, as aesthetics inform the two media differently. As a rough example of it, still images can be recorded vertically whereas moving images cannot.

The above reflections should suffice to illustrate how recording strategies for the same camera might shift from one recording policy to another and, possibly, produce new and innovative aesthetics. I do not refer to a photographer shooting a video vertically but, instead, to the possibility of shaping aesthetic concerns *because of* the chosen medium: such a possibility adds a new feature to the already extremely intricate maze of possibilities informing today’s digital production.

In spite of the expanding Web archives of ‘ugly photographs,’ (see further below) I do not wish photography to go back to be a fully elitist expertise. On the contrary, I invite and strongly advocate the development of visual skills and a visual literacy for all. In the next sections, I will develop my idea of an aware and finalised aesthetics as the un-avoidable pillar to any visual research. Even though my last statement might appear redundant and truly self-explanatory, I will explore how, particularly in today’s digital world, the visual is

always taken for granted and dismissed as naturally given: however, “just because we have eyes it doesn’t mean we know how to see” (Greenaway 2008).

I will further explore how diverse gazes might be the product of specific identity backgrounds and contextualise the extent to which these gazes might thoroughly signify the Real *because of* the audiences’ mental representation. My focus on questioning identities in the form of ‘Western’ or ‘Muslim’ or that of a ‘Western Muslim’ will finally invite the appreciation of the human being as a ‘communicative hub.’

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the above sections, I have explored the extent to which aesthetic form and composition affect communication and semantics. In the next chapters, I will further contextualise aesthetics as a notion encompassing everything related to form, as fully exploited upon its aware understanding and usage. In other words, aesthetics will be appreciated as form that is both intended and finalised.

I have evinced the un-manageability and un-foreseeability of the many variable of the fieldwork and briefly mentioned its increasingly politicised nature, specifically within practices of representation of the Muslim world. In order to compensate, complete and, possibly, enhance, the signification of the Real, I argue for the comprehensive management of the digital file through its post-production, i.e. the signification of the representation: despite the established tradition rejecting any ‘altered’ or ‘manipulated’ image in photojournalism, I agree with Eugene Smith when he declares how

the first word I would remove from the folklore of journalism is the word ‘objective’ [as] my responsibilities within journalism are two. My first responsibility is to my subjects. My second responsibility is to my readers (Ritchin 2013: 15).

The extent to which the digital file is re-arranging epistemologies and ethics for the photograph is widely acknowledge and no longer really debatable; in such a framework, the magnitude of the digital revolution calls for a comprehensive rethinking of its terms of reference. In his famous 1976 essay, Cartier-Bresson explores different issues regarding the realm of photography, and among these, composition, colour and agency. He ends his essay with what, among photographers, has become the established definition of photography:

I have talked at some length, but of only one kind of photography. There are many kinds. Certainly the fading snapshot carried in the back of a wallet, the glossy advertising catalogue, and the great range of things in between are photography. I don't attempt to define it for everyone. I only attempt to define it to myself: to me, photography is the *simultaneous recognition*, in a fraction of a second, *of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organisation of forms which give that event its proper expression* (Cartier-Bresson 1999: 42, emphasis added).

Cartier-Bresson's quote raises a wide range of issues on the diverse practices, agencies and semantics variously related to 'photography.' I will disentangle them within the terms of the phenomenological perspective Cartier-Bresson suggests and upon my notion of the Meta-Image. In such a theoretical context, the philosopher Umberto Galimberti warns us of the extent to which Western philosophy has consistently tried to

submit the particular to the universal, the contingent to the necessary, the multiple to the unique, the earthy to the spiritual, the profane to the divine, the real to the ideal, the relative to the absolute, resolving any conflict of ambi/valence into the pre-valence of one over all (Galimberti 1983: 20, my translation).

As semioticians have long recognised, communication is concerned with much more than mere information. The undisputed relevance media has gathered, alongside its frenetic reframing of epistemological and ontological concerns, renders virtually impossible any

permanent theoretical paradigm. Not only cultures and societies are multi-layered, complex and difficult to narrate, but they can be accessed solely within qualitative settings: the challenge for academic research is gigantic.

I have started to identify the 'un-refined' as my ontological tag for the digital photograph. In the next chapter, I will further develop my stance through the notion of photography as 'semantics without an ontology' to progress towards my assessment of the Meta-Image. In more detail, I invite the appreciation of the evocative quality of the medium, and prefer it to its documentary function: documentary will be approached as a style, and the photograph as the composite result of the signification of the Real with the signification of the representation. Post-production will be appreciated in its capability to impact and signify the photograph through verbal formats like captions and commentaries, and as the semantic vector for both the stand-alone photograph and the photo essay.

## **[Chapter Three] Signifying The Representation – The Photograph**

## [CHAPTER THREE]

### SIGNIFYING THE REPRESENTATION – THE PHOTOGRAPH

It is all automatic. All I have to do is press the button. It's a camera that every amateur buys [pause, points to his head] It's all in there (Freeman 2011: 6).

In the previous chapter I have called for the enhancement of the notion of the fieldwork to be incorporated within the wider system of practices contributing to signify the Real. By expanding the space of the ethnographic signification beyond the strictly confined notion of participant-observation in the fieldwork, I aim to suggest the extent to which processes of visual understanding, depiction and representation might capitalise on the photojournalist's expertise: this is not thoroughly new, as photojournalists have been among the very first to question their established duties and any traditional role as 'illustrators.' Cases such as Walker Evans and Eugene Smith are much less infrequent than expected, and should be appreciated alongside those of, among many others, Paul Griffiths and Gilles Peress.

The practice of signifying the fieldwork is here contextualised through juxtaposition with how photographs have been 'received,' 'engaged' and 'digested' by audiences: I do so as my aim is to progress towards a 'thicker' understanding of processes of visual production and knowledge distribution as focused upon 'intended' meaning production. In such a context, I explicitly recall the epistemological divide of *Writing Cultures* as a privileged moment in which established anthropological notions were thoroughly challenged by the tactical incorporation of post-structuralist concerns. I have intensively participated in this research field through my media production, and, upon my findings, enlarged the frames of reference of my theoretical analysis: because of the limited attention of *Writing Cultures* to visual issues, I have further borrowed ideas and perspectives from the creative industries and arranged them upon my professional background as a photojournalist.



I am aware of the delicate process of theoretical homogenization my comprehensive reframing requires, and this is unquestionably a matter of great concern which I have been assessing by investigating my agency alongside the research subject 'Hawza.' Arguably, the only way to manage such a two-fold focus was through the self-reflective attitude I have applied to both spaces of signification, that of the Hawzas and of myself as a photojournalist: as a result, I found myself troubled in identifying the 'Other' as 'other from what.' I concurrently came to appreciate how notions of identities would collide against the fluidity of today's cultures: I posit the photograph, for a wide variety of reasons I am about to confront, as the pivot of such an extremely rich and intricate maze of significations.

In more detail, I will use this chapter to question what is a photograph and contextualise practices of intended significations for the representation in relation to my audience. I have already briefly mentioned the case study of the Sierra Leone *mu'allim* and my post-production as an (unconscious) Revealing Index of that encounter. Capitalising on Robert Gardner's notes on the extent to which fieldwork might reflect the ethnographer's concerns *before* those of the research subject (Barbash and Taylor 2007; Gardner 2008; Gardner and Brakhage 2000), I will introduce notions of inter-subjectivities, communicative hubs, rhizomes and fluid identities. As an example, Gardner's 1997's *The Passenger* is a visual ethnography (can we still apply such a tag?) of the artist Sean Scully, in which he *consciously* and *purposely* crosses back and forth the recording space to state, *explicitly* and *unquestionably*, the extent to which he belongs and participates to the frame: who are the identities engaging, in which way, to construct what signification?

By trying to re-structure the relation across the sign, the simulacrum and the symbol, I will move towards a strategic assessment of the practice of post-production: aesthetics will be finally appreciated as intended and finalised semantics. I will further contextualise photographs in relation to the verbal text as part of the distinct semantic policies different

media promote. Through the final appreciation of photography as ‘semantics without ontology,’ I will prepare the ground for my idea of the ‘Meta-Image.’

## **REPRESENTING AND SIGNIFYING**

### ***Between Taking And Processing***

The limited attention academia overall pays to the medium ‘photograph’, and to the photographer’s perspective specifically, parallels an oversimplified appreciation of visual literacy concerns (Elkins 2008). At the same time, photojournalism rests in the very hybrid and undefined space between the arts and documentation. On one side it is questionable to limit creative practices and spaces of engagement, on the other the boundaries between the representation of the Real and the Real itself have been ontologically questioned: derived iconophobic attitudes to the human sciences (Taylor 1996) parallel the impoverished quality of current visual practice and analysis (Greenaway 2008).

Eco’s suggestion of using the encyclopaedia as “a semantic concept and the dictionary [as] a pragmatic device” (Eco 1984b: 85) offers me an epistemological approach to the issue. The photograph is approached through an abundance of definitions and different theoretical outlooks: by using the dictionary as a “pragmatic device,” I intend to ‘construct’ an operative notion of the photograph from the perspective of the doer.

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines photography as “the art or practice of taking and processing photographs” (Oxford 2012): the binary process of “taking and processing” raises a whole range of crucial issues, such as the extent to which the taking without the processing still produces a photograph, its synchronic dimension, and the human contribution to it.

In a digital environment, the camera's internal processor records the matrix of zeroes and ones that constitutes the file, and *simultaneously* converts them into a visual map, the photographic preview, which is available *immediately* on the camera monitor. However, the same does not apply to analogue photography, for which there is a clearly arranged sequence of diachronic steps: in fact, once the shutter is released and the film impressed by the light, the camera keeps the *taken* but *unprocessed* photograph as a 'latent picture.'

Following the terms of the Oxford Dictionary entry, I am puzzled by two opposing concerns. On the one hand, I wonder whether the latent picture might be appreciated as a photograph and, on the other, I question the human contribution to the digital camera rendering of the photograph: in other words, do photographs happen or are they 'done'? Concurrently, if photography is defined by the act of "taking and processing" a photograph, I wonder what the semantic difference is between a digital photograph and any still frame captured from the recording of a CCTV camera. The taking and the processing are common to both settings, but could the second case be appreciated as photography?

I have already briefly mentioned that I value the available photographic equipment very little, and so – incidentally – does Helmut Newton in Freeman's opening quote: the camera is not relevant, nor the functionalities it offers but only how it serves the photographer's intentionality (see also Cartier-Bresson 1999: 38). By assessing the extent to which photographs do not happen but are the result of a finalised practice of signification of both the Real and the representation, hence the centrality of aesthetics, I will imply that CCTV camera merely produce 'visualised information:' by juxtaposing 'information' to 'communication,' I aim to reaffirm the extent to which communication is thoroughly human.

## ***Information And Communication***

Information and communication are two very difficult notions to frame unequivocally. Following Umberto Eco's *The Open Work*, I assess 'information' as the differential resulting from what was known before against what was known after a communication. At the same time, 'communication' will be appreciated as the personal understanding of the same communicative practice or, in other words, its qualitative and sensorial engagement. Hence, the juxtaposition differentiates information from communication as, respectively, the quantitative and qualitative component of any communicative process (Eco 1989b: 66-68).

Eco uses the stop sign as an example: a stop sign is not meant to connote anyone's understanding of life, but only inform of a requested action, that of stopping. Those looking at the sign do not increase their appreciation for the street where the sign is located (i.e. a possible measurement of its qualitative engagement), but are solely concerned with being informed of what is required to be done. In a similar way, a CCTV camera informs about a series of events but those events do not communicate: 'impersonal' communication only transmits information, whereas human intervention in the form of *human intentionality* transforms communicated information into informed communication.

The case of a recent commercial by Limonada-Reserva should further clarify the issue. The brand runs a series of ads with the CCTV recording of one of their shops being broken into. On top of it, Limonada-Reserva adds a new communicative *layer* to transform the 'communicated information' of a burglary into the 'informed communication' that there is no need to steal as sales are now on (Limonada-Reserva 2013): impersonal information, 'the burglary,' was converted into finalised communication, 'the sales are on.'

## ***Metonymical Pipes And Ethics***

Through my work I intend to question the ontology of photography as I aim to explore what a photograph is, represents and signifies, and whether it does any of these, as derived from my experience as a practitioner. More in detail, I will assess the notion of the 'photograph' as too limited for current cultures and socio-political dynamics, and favour that of the 'image' (see further below). My notion of the Meta-Image will be employed to challenge disciplines and medium consistencies, and promote the overcoming of the notion of photography as a clearly defined practice: its verisimilar quality will serve to arrange a new tactical approach to the relation between the Real and its representation.

Since the end of the nineteenth century theoretical approaches have identified the photograph as an illustration, as a sign of metonymical representation, or a 'document.' One of the most revealing misunderstandings in the history of the medium follows Baudelaire's profound dislike of photography (Baudelaire 1992: 220-221) following the

truce [...] established by which painting was liberated from representational work and explored abstraction, while photography concentrated on the *representational* (La Grange 2005: 57, emphasis added).

Traditionally, a photographed pipe would coincide with the signification of a pipe, and such a direct relation has promoted plain unequivocal understandings. Eco borrows from Hobbes a most convincing definition as he assesses "the sign [for] the evident of a consequent" (Eco 1984b: 16). If this is the case, the photograph portrays the Real by virtue of similitude, of semantic mirroring: by consistently transmitting the informative capital of the Real, it sets the equation for which  $A=A$ , i.e. the Real is the Real.

However, Magritte's series on the *Treachery of the Image* (1920s-1930s) signalled for the very first time "whether there exists between a thing, its *image*, and even its name an

inevitable link” (Magritte 2012, emphasis added). The juxtaposition of diverse communicative forms embedded onto the same format not only introduced an early example of multimedia, but questioned the extent to which language might identify both the thing itself and the represented object.



*Magritte This is not a pipe, 1929.*

In his series of paintings, Magritte explicitly revealed the disjunction between the pipe and its representation: following on his analytical thread, Foucault's 1962 essay assesses how neither the visual text (i.e. the image), nor the verbal text (i.e. the caption)

is a pipe, but rather a text that simulates a pipe; a drawing of a pipe that simulates a drawing of a pipe; a pipe (drawn other than as a drawing) that resembles a pipe (drawn after a pipe that itself would be other than a drawing). [Several] discourses in a single statement – more than enough to demolish the fortress where similitude was the prisoner of the assertion of resemblance (Foucault 1998: 200).

Nevertheless, regardless of any challenge brought about by either post-structuralism or post-modernism, the two founding concepts of similitude and resemblance still dominate both popular and specialist understandings of the photograph. The photograph is overall and constantly employed as a mere representation of what happened, or, following Eco and Hobbes, as a sign. Contrary to expectations, this has further increased because of the 'digital revolution' and the popularization of mobile phones, all of which with cameras (Campbell 2013c): what I have previously introduced as 'ugly photographic archives' mainly refers to and is the result of the endlessly fed social media communication. My adjective, ugly, is here assessed as central to much of my photographic research; with 'ugly photographic archives' I do not refer to 'ugly' as 'not beautiful' because that would immediately raise enormous controversies on taste. Instead, with 'ugly,' I explicitly indicate the proliferation of visual, mostly photographic, metonymical communication: old women and men carrying on their faces the signs of long and troubled lives, smiling children, pouring cats and everything which is immediate, universal and gratuitous as already known and already seen. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram expand, proliferate and multiply these subjects alongside dawns, sunsets and Venetian *gondolas*: upon their quantitative presence, social media communication is reshaping social spaces and relationships, and thoroughly re-arranging the semantic space of the photograph. In such a context, today's shared, tweeted and 'liked' photographic archives are benchmarking visual processes of communication through the quantitative strength gathered upon social media proliferation and distribution dynamics. The portfolios I receive for a professional review mostly contain these sets of themes with no effort to overcome or re-signify them: I fear these imageries are becoming the pillar of today's social visual knowledge and might epitomise the 'distorted' usage of 'visual communication' as that which accompanies the verbal visualising it rather than creatively

engaging it. In this context, the over-encompassing dimension of today's digital communication is thoroughly redefining visual signification dynamics and media forms. As I will develop in the following sections, the situation is greatly impacting the professional market too: which media outlet would buy the photograph of a professional reporter in war trenches when the soldiers fighting post for free their lives? However, if the previous one were a pipe, what might be the following?



*Magritte This is not a pipe, 1931.*

Alongside these forms of proliferation of 'ugly archives', the assertive role of the photograph keeps on being questioned because of the post-production. Previous ontological identities between the signification of the Real and that of the representation have been fading away, and the perfect resemblance between the two has become a mere possibility: all this has produced very severe consequences on ethics of



representation, and both visual anthropology and photojournalism have been questioning what a correct and ethical signification of the Real might require and lead to.

Histories of both anthropology and photojournalism have been, and still are to a very dramatic extent, confronting the implicit power relations between the 'represented' and the 'representing subject.' Assessments of whether the represented part should be treated as a 'subject' or 'object' have crucially informed theories of representation particularly from the 1960s; in the 1970s it reached a crucial stage with the distinct impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said's intellectual legacy has promoted the cause of post-colonial studies, which in turn has successfully contributed to challenging the idea of the portrayed subject as an 'object.' Final policies of representation dealing with the research issue in terms of 'subject' rather than 'object' epitomise the degree of power allocated to the represented part over representational practices: this further concerns not only photographic ethics, but aesthetic decision-making processes and, more generally, post-production activities.

I have previously assessed the portrait of the Sierra Leone Sheikh as a Revealing Index of the photographer's personal engagement with the signification of the Real: by contextualising the extent to which diverse media forms impact *differently* processes of communication, I aim to contextualise the terms of the new theoretical landscape the digital shift is arranging (Floridi 2011). In fact, I wish to overcome the idea of the photograph as "basically a perceptual medium [for its appreciation as] a largely conceptual one as well" (Ritchin 2010: 124); to do so I will use four case studies (Mentor, Walski, Aranda and *The Simulacrum of the Blind*) and intertwine them with my exploration of the relation between the sign, the symbol and the simulacrum: in such a manner, I will be progressing in my definition of the 'photograph' as the aware, intended and finalised product of the signification of the Real and the representation.

## SIGNS, SIMULACRA AND SYMBOLS

### ***Mentor and the Die Weltwoche Case***

In April 2012 the Council for Germany's Roma sued the magazine *Die Weltwoche* and asked for a publication ban accusing the authors of having misused an image. The photograph in question depicts a five-year-old boy, Mentor, pointing a toy pistol at the viewer by pointing it at the photographer.



© Livio Mancini / Redux / Laif.

The photograph, taken in 2008 by the photojournalist Livio Mancini for the German photographic agency Laif, is part of a wider project *intended* to represent the very poor conditions of the Roma community. At that time, Mentor occupied a trash dump with his family and Livio wanted to represent the misery the community was living in.

A far-right Swiss magazine singled out one photograph from the whole work, bought it, and re-signified it for its cover page with the title-caption "The Roma are coming." Laif stated that

the Swiss *Weltwoche* has *misused* a feature photograph by our photographer Livio Mancini/Redux about the inhumane life of Roma children on a waste disposal site in Kosovo for an illustration of an article about alleged raids of Roma children in Switzerland in its current issue. *This use is distorting, altered the truth and reversed the meaning of the photograph in its opposite* (LAIF 2012b, emphasis added).

This long quotation addresses all the issues I wish to evince for my research on communication: in fact, it refers to the magazine's use of the photograph as "distorting" as it makes the photograph state what it didn't mean originally (see the aberrancy of the signal, Hartley 2002). In photojournalism, it is an established practice to rely on tags and key wording to support the intended signification for photographic distribution. What follows is the key wording for Mentor's image:

**Die "Garbage Gang" des Kosovo.** In the outskirts of the Kosovar city of Gjakova (Djakovica in Serbian), a group of Roma kids live with their families in a slum built over a garbage dump. Moved after the war, they survive by sorting through and selling recyclable trash. Neither Kosovar nor Serbian, this ethnic group has always been shunned. These Roma children only know life in the dump, a poisoned and diseased playground (LAIF 2012a, emphasis in the original).

Even though the text is very clear in contextualising the rationale for the whole work, it cannot close off alternatives to a different management of text/image mixed media combinations. Arguably, the informative dimension of the photograph has remained intact (a poor child points his gun to the photographer), but its communicative power has been re-arranged for an alternative signification of the Real ("the Roma are coming"). The situation is multifaceted and it encompasses both the ontology of the photograph (i.e. what

it is as a stand-alone communicative vector), and its epistemology, namely the distinct approaches through which other media engage it.

Though as a photojournalist I fully agree with Laif's statement and disappointment, nevertheless this example shows the extent to which might be unmanageable to preserve fully consistent policies of signification. Laif proved to be rather *naïf* in its confrontation as it invited

all picture departments to use *documentary* photographs not for *illustrative* purposes outside their context as this could lead to distorting uses. We live in a world that is more and more visual oriented. Therefore, we need *visual ethics*, that is obligated to express the *real* meaning of the photographs and the *intention* of the photographer (LAIF 2012b, emphasis added).

In spite of my professional sympathy for Laif's position, I remain fiercely opposed to managing the complexities of a "more and more visual oriented world" by forcing picture departments to convey the 'real' meaning of a photograph: as I will detail below, I posit my research outside an informative framework and appreciate the extent to which photographs might signify upon un-predictable Revealing Indexes to the point of even recognising that there might be no 'real' meaning for a photograph.

While I will come back to the issue through my notion of photography as semantics without ontology, I wish to further contextualise Laif's invitation with a recent example. The following photograph *shows* (the photograph as a document) former UK Cabinet Member Liam Fox in Sri Lanka.



*Liam Fox and his former flatmate in Sri Lanka. No copyright indication available. Source: [mikileaks.blogspot.com](http://mikileaks.blogspot.com).*

The 2011 photograph was found on the Web by an Italian blogger and forwarded to *The Guardian* for the daily's smoking gun in its campaign against the Cabinet Member. It is clear how any original intention, or intended communication of the local photographer, appears of no relevance a year after: most certainly the photograph was intended for the local authorities to keep a recorded memory of an important guest: it obviously was not planned to prove what Mr Fox had for a long time vehemently negated but finally acknowledged because of *this* 'document.' As Eco reminds us of, it

is of no interest to know if [a photograph] was posed (and therefore faked), whether it was the testimony of an act of conscious bravado, if it was the work of a professional photographer who gauged the moment, the light, the frame, or whether it virtually took itself, was snapped accidentally by unskilled and lucky hands. At the moment it appeared, its *communicative* career began. Once again the political and the private have been marked by the plots of the *symbolic*, which, as always happens, has proved *producer of reality* (Eco 1986: 217, emphasis added).

For both the cases of Mentor and of Mr Fox, the ‘new’ signification was the result of a new multimedia setting with no aesthetic alteration of the original file: any photograph is always part, and only a part, of a much wider network of social dynamics, practices and communicative policies. If the *Guardian* had not campaigned against Mr Fox, or the latter had decided on a different communicative strategy, or the Italian blogger had never found it, then the Sri-Lankan photograph would have produced only communicated information rather than informed communication: this restates the unresolved dilemma of what photographs mean, communicate and inform of.

The model of communication I am working towards assesses the photographic practice as un-containable within any pre-arranged or identifiable signification. As a result, I have preferred the combined signification of the intended Real and the intended representation (see the section on Aranda) to the, to me out-dated, informative model juxtaposing preferred to aberrant meanings (see Hartley 2002).

As I have already indicated, dictionary entries reflect the unclear ontology of the photograph as a medium of communication. Alongside the noted quality of ‘taking and processing,’ the *Oxford Dictionary* refines its entry by reference to photography as an “art or practice” (Oxford 2012), while the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as “the activity or job of taking photographs or films” (Cambridge 2012). The Longman vocabulary explains photography as “the art, profession, or method of producing photographs or the scenes in films” (Longman 2012). Even though both the Cambridge and Longman entries add a reference to photography in movies and more nuanced juxtapositions between art, practice and method, none assesses photography in the way the Webster dictionary does: by recognising photography as “the art or process of *producing images* by the action of radiant energy and especially light on a sensitive surface” (Webster 2012, emphasis added), it finally suggests the alternative framework I will be developing below.

### ***The Photograph As A Composite Image - The Walski Affair***

The issue of how and what to frame has been assessed above within practices of the signification of the Real for which the photographer decides *what* is important and *when* it is most important. Chapter Two has also stated my preference for the verisimilitude paradigm against any assessment of the photograph as ‘true,’ ‘staged,’ or ‘fake;’ in this Chapter, I aim to further complement such a perspective contextualising it alongside the signification of the representation.

Brian Walski is an award-winning photojournalist who used to work for the *Los Angeles Times*. His career was terminated because of a (discovered) montage in which he generated a single ‘photograph’ out of two distinct digital files.





*All photographs © Brian Walski, 2003.*



The juxtaposition of the recording moments, its unfolding dynamics and the speed of the action suggest that the two original files are most probably consecutive, and possibly shot as part of a prolonged sequence. The photographer collected two distinct signifying fragments, and arguably moulded them together with the purpose of producing a single stronger signification of the Real. Regardless of his rationales, the *LA Times* decided to dismiss him for allegedly breaking their code of conduct: he altered the signification of the Real by altering the signification of the representation.

Walski justified his decision with the consideration that the combined file would more acutely and incisively signify the events he had witnessed in Basra on March 30th, 2003. He strongly believed that he acted at no detriment to the signification of the Real (Flybring 2009), and that he was best placed to make such a judgement. Both original photographs testify a fragment of the Real, something that certainly happened as neither had been allegedly altered, or artificially arranged. As much as they were 'real' and 'true' as singular shots, the photographer argued that their combination into a single file would equally and consistently be 'true.' In such a context, would any assessment of the combined photograph as 'enhanced' rather than 'tampered with' differently appreciate a complementary outlook for photographic communication?

Walski wanted to *communicate* 'more' and 'better' by combining two distinct digital files: he fabricated an 'artificial' Real out of two 'real' ones. His action unquestionably breaks all traditional codes of ethics in photojournalism and of visual anthropology too. However, I agree with Pedro Meyer in assessing how "the photographer Brian Walski has been dismissed from the *LA Times* for no valid reason" (Meyer 2013); Meyer further recognises how it "seems that the newspaper does not fully understand that the CONTENT of the image [Walski] sent in was not altered in its essence, even though he combined two consecutive images" (Meyer 2013, emphasis in the original).

Finally, he wrote

they have fired someone for doing a professional job in trying to come up with a better picture, the same way that any of their journalists polish a text so that it reads better and is succinct (why should a photographer be deprived of doing exactly the same that other professionals are doing on a daily basis as long as the information is not distorted?). The only explanation I can find, is that by accusing the photographer and attempting to portray themselves as publishing "unmanipulated" news, they are seeking to conceal the factual reality of their biased and one-sided presentation of the overall news. That seems to be the more important issue at hand (Meyer 2013).

According to the news coverage, the *LA Times* assessed the alteration of the medium content *as consequential to* the alteration of its medium form: by tampering with the signification of the representation, Walski altered the signification of the Real and hence placed himself outside the tradition of photojournalism. The *Washington Post* sided unequivocally against the photographer by recognising that "news *photographs are the equivalent of direct quotations* and therefore are sacrosanct" (Van Riper 2012, emphasis in the original).

However appreciated, the extent to which the visual representation of the Real might be treated as a quote puzzles me deeply: as corroborated with the World Press Photography Awards of 2012 and 2013, this example explicitly questions whether form might be appreciated as content, and aesthetics understood as a signifying vector.

Meyer's main criticism confronted the daily for implicitly dismissing the role of photography, and claiming a patented purity for "unmanipulated news;" journalists are never accused of fabricating the Real by editing their articles but photojournalists are not allowed to do the same. In fact, it might seem they are required to merely act as passive recording devices for which the representation mirrors the Real as Hobbes' sign (the pipe is the pipe). In the following section, I intend to contextualise aesthetics comprehensively as that which

promotes a communicative approach to forms of signification of the visual ‘document:’ in due time this renewed assessment will lead first to my notion of photography as semantics without ontology, and, eventually to my idea of the Meta-Image.

### ***Aesthetics***

I have already addressed the limited relevance aesthetics has within the human sciences outside the arts alongside its contested usages across assessments of ‘real’ Reals and ‘simulated’ ones. Possibly the clearest and most widely accepted definition of aesthetics still dates to Immanuel Kant’s, for whom it is

a kind of representation that is *purposive in itself* and, though *without an end*, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable *communication* (Kant 2000: section 44, emphasis added).

The philosopher Mario Perniola adds that “the aesthetic experience differs clearly from the useful, as interested in the effective existence of the Beautiful, and the moral, as interested in the effective existence of the Good” (Perniola 2004: 68, my translation). In such a context, the aesthetic component seems to inform representations with an added layer of ungraspable and indefinable communication, one which is purposive in itself and hence rather ‘un-usable.’

In my progressive assessment of the centrality of aesthetics for visual communication, I will elaborate on Jill Bennett’s recent research on *Practical Aesthetics*. Even though Bennett’s work has focused only on the arts rather than on the human sciences, I share a number of her concerns, and agree with her radical rethinking of the contested term ‘aesthetics.’ By reconceptualising the subject within wider issues of sensorial perception, she addresses “affect as a significant feature of cultural relations” (Bennett 2012: xviii). She further advocates the overcoming of the “persistent conception of aesthetics as

disconnected from social concerns, and [foster how] a practical aesthetics must be one of activism” (Bennett 2012: xviii). Bennett conceives aesthetics as “informed by and derived from practical, real-world encounters, an aesthetics that is in turn capable of being used or put into effect in a real situation” (Bennett 2012: 2).

I intend to elaborate on Bennett’s perspective to explore the extent to which the phenomenological and sensorial components of photographic communication might lead to appreciate aesthetics not as a stand-alone communicative element, but as a purposely-aimed feature encompassing an *aware* and intended communication (see Chapter Two). Following Jung (Jung 1995: 343), awareness is here appreciated as encompassing both consciousness and instinct, and thus as equally accepting intuition as a crucial signifying vector. By choosing what to include (quantity) and how to arrange it (quality), the photographer frames her communication of the Real upon elements such as, for instance, the depth of field purposely applied to communicate a singularity against a multitude (see the selective focus and the photograph mafu\_20100228\_0016). In such a context, choices over which f/stop to use shape the intentionality of a policy of representation, and suggest explicit significations of the Real; likewise, aesthetic decisions inform the signification of the stand-alone representation and, through montage, of the whole photographic essay. Hence, an approach to “practical aesthetics as a *modus operandi* [i.e. as a tactic] rather than a field in its own right” (Bennett 2012: 9) finalises a strategy which questions creativity, production and signification practice.

Not only do different aesthetics inform distinct and even contrasting significations of the Real but they invite diverse understandings of the representation. According to Pierce, a sign is “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Eco 1984b: 14). I have already mentioned (above) the extent to which the photograph has been consistently perceived as the Hobbesian sign of direct signification of the Real

both within mainstream media and in academia. Bennett's practical stance suggests an operative possibility for aesthetics to overcome the Kantian notion of purposefulness: such rubric is here assessed within a semantic appreciation of aesthetics as that which informs both significations of the Real and of the representation.

In my argument, aesthetics permeates production practice from its inception: as I teach in my seminars, to shoot a portrait from above or below the subject's eye line fosters a thoroughly different communication. In spite of its long history of 'alterations,' the photograph is still widely believed to be a proof of forensic testimony, and much effort is devoted to preserving this quality. With reference to the Walski case, Meyer argues that

I did not see, for example, on the front page of the LA TIMES today, any of the images of the Iraqi children killed by US bombs plus the fact that the International Red Cross has denounced the war atrocities perpetrated by US bombs falling on a totally civilian population of farmers in the city of Hindiya. That in my book is the real omission of facts not what Brian Walski did (Meyer 2013).

As a consequence, the photograph as a document rests at the centre of specific practices of signification of the Real, which have acquired a dramatic relevance within social and political representations of the Other: its assessment includes both the extent to which a photograph might carry the traces of its Real, and how these representations might be signified, represented and distributed. In order to disentangle the complexities of all these intertwined planes, I will first juxtapose the symbol to the simulacrum, and eventually prefer Jung's notion to Baudrillard's contribution.

The French philosopher is convinced that simulations create the Real and annihilate any contemporary assessment of 'truth.' He invites us to acknowledge the new "era of simulacra and of simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognise his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true" (Baudrillard 1994: 6).

Baudrillard's thesis acquired further popular relevance at the time of the first Gulf War when he published three polemic contributions on media, the Real and the representation (Baudrillard 1995). The main thesis of these contributions indicates the extent to which different media representations produce new policies of signification: if the only broadcasted image of the Gulf War is the endless repetition of the smart bomb going down the chimney, any derived understanding of that specific war and, from then on, of *any war*, will discharge ground-fighting activities.

Against Baudrillard's analysis of the simulacrum as an autonomous signifying practice, I will assess it as a "dead symbol." Following Jung, the symbol is alive only so long as it is pregnant with meaning.

But once its meaning has been born out of it, once that expression is found that formulates the thing sought, expected, or divined even better than the hitherto accepted symbol, then the symbol is dead, i.e.: it possesses only a historical significance (Jung 1992: 816).

In such a context, as long as its image remains engaging, a photograph is never reduced to the representative quality of the document and continues to be semantically 'creative.' Once it loses such a quality, it becomes a "dead symbol," a simulacrum for which a pipe is always and only a pipe.

Aesthetics has often been accused of twisting the sign into a simulacrum as, by 'enhancing' reality, it disjoints it from its original signifier. As a consequence, the relation between the sign and the simulacrum is traditionally arranged around the Real as the ultimate signifier: the sign is understood to depict the Real, the simulacrum to produce it. Drawing on my previous arguments, I will disentangle both definitions from the Real as that which is fully "un-quotable." Instead, I have preferred verisimilitude as my ultimate referent to the signification of the Real and the representation: this will in due course

prompt a comprehensive re-adjustment of the sign, the symbol and the simulacrum. As a result, the sign is here assessed as a mere signifier which has the capability to evolve differently into a symbol and a simulacrum. Aesthetics is not what turns the sign into a simulacrum: this would reinstate a role for 'truth' in both the Real and the representation. Instead, I differentiate the symbol from the simulacrum upon the distinct *intentionality* informing its policy of communication, with an open perspective for the symbol and a closed one for the simulacrum.

The simulacrum is here appreciated as the consistent portrayal of the sign as univocal information. Its simulative quality does not relate to the Real, but to its *intended* communication: this means that the perfect equation between the signifier and the signified is not reached around the Real as a discriminant, but upon its purposely arranged representation. In other words, it is of little relevance to assess the extent to which the pipe is the pipe as the simulacrum is defined upon whether, say, the pipe represented as a hovercraft is 'received' as a hovercraft instead of a pipe. Hence, the simulacrum is a representation shaped and purposely finalised towards a unique signification, whereas the symbol is what intends multiple significations.

Mancini signifies Mentor with the specific simulacrum of his very poor conditions, and *Die Weltwoche* re-signifies the representation as an alternative simulacrum through a combination of verbal and visual components. As for the case of Walski's mounted image, his finalised post-production had, within my theoretical framework, no simulative intentionality as it was finalised to expand both quantitative and qualitative communication. His intended policy of signification was as symbolic as its two originating files: the difference was merely in the *effectiveness* and not in the *capability* to signify the Real.

## ***Photojournalism, The Symbol And Photoreportage***

The symbol as 'image' is a thorough call that stimulates the wholeness of a human being into a comprehensive relation for which *thought* and *feeling*, *senses* and *intuition* all relate to each other (Jacobi 1994: 102, emphasis added, my translation).

The notion of the symbol often overlaps that of the sign, and the two concepts have been addressed differently from a wide variety of perspectives and epistemologies, producing diverse ontologies: this is particularly true of psychoanalysis, for which such a distinction is often posited as the main reason for the rupture between Freud and his pupil and heir Jung.

Against Freudian 'structuralism' for which phallic symbols signify, only and always, the *membrum virile*, Jung recognises how "in no single case can we have the *a priori* certainty that in practice the symbol must be interpreted in that way" (Jung 1998: 185). Throughout his *corpus*, Jung has been advocating to "*treat the symbol as it were not fixed* [and] try to discover what things mean *for the patient*" (Jung 1998: 186, emphasis added). His contemporary reference to the simulacrum as a fixed 'dead symbol' clarifies the extent to which the symbol is creatively alive upon its state of endless signification.

Using the Cross as an example, Jacobi explains how "the Cross *is* the Christ for some, for others [it is] Christianity, for some others [it is] Christ's Passion" (Jacobi 1994: 112, emphasis added, my translation); the Cross is not believed to *represent* these symbols, it *is* these significations, and, for those engaging with it, symbols become the Real instead of mere representations (see the section of flashbulb memories).



The same Jacobi, one of the most prominent heirs of Jung, explores how the word 'symbol' is

derived from the Greek 'symbollo' and represents the collector of a wide array of diverse definitions and interpretations. All of these, however, share the fact that with that word one has to refer to something which is *invisible* and *deeper* that goes beyond any *objective* and *visible* meaning (Jacobi 1994: 94, emphasis added, my translation).

Jung's notion invites a thoroughly phenomenological outlook which appreciates signifying dynamics as *temporary* performances of *temporary* identities (Coole 2005; Merleau-Ponty 1989; Merleau-Ponty 1991). Likewise, the possibility not only to engage but to perform each and every signification mirrors the parallel concern for "the birth of the reader [...] at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 1977: 148). In such a context, the representation of a pipe is first arranged as a symbol and a simulacrum at the signification of the Real, and then conveyed as such for its representation. Only then audiences engage it differently because of diverse performative *hinc et nunc* dimensions: hence, not only the signification of the Real and that of the representation might be communicated as symbols and simulacra upon a planned intentionality, but their performance might displace any intended communication.

As a result, the number of these significations is virtually infinite, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as the same audience might endlessly produce simulacra and symbols upon diverse phenomenological settings. For such a reason, I will approach audiences' response only in a very limited manner as their exploration is incompatible with my preference for a qualitative framework. Furthermore, a quantitative analysis of audiences' receptions would require a rather different analytical framework and the kind of resources, both financial and of time, which are not available for the present context. Hence, my focus will remain on signifying practices instead of receptive ones.

Photojournalism has long been a practice to assess, signify and establish the 'Truth,' (as in the case of, among many, Gilles Peress' photographic forensics): with the motto "F/8 and be there" photographs as documents would advocate and inspire for action. Its established tradition has long privileged a set of actions motivated upon the terms of, mostly, a simulacrum-led policy of signification. The human sciences have similarly been using the photograph to illustrate verbal narratives for which the visual would simply *testify* the informing Word. Against such paradigms I do not aim to produce confusion or instigate practices of noise-production (Eco 1989); rather, I wish to complement a functionalist, even if to me, rather out-dated understanding of the photograph, with a new model of knowledge production encompassing both the signification of the Real and the representation.

I will therefore promote photoreportage as an alternative paradigm for my research. Photoreportage does not aim to arrange a complete and univocal signification of the Real by constructing a finalised visual narrative, but it uses photography to pose questions, initiate discussions, and support more contextualised understandings. In such a theoretical framework, photographs do not serve as a document but as the semantic space which is continuously engaged and re-signified through generative relations: the photoreporter's aim is to question much more than convince. In such a juxtaposition

the French call *reportage* [what] involves the articulation of the rhythm of events, or what Cartier-Bresson refers to in his own work as the 'tasting' or 'sniffing' of a situation, against the traditional American sense of photojournalism and its less visually dynamic (and more verbal) goal of framing certain targeted objects that have been declared of interest (Ritchin 2010: 94).

The progressive digitalisation of contemporary photographic forms and formats has supported the development of a wide array of signifying possibilities: for instance, the Mashup format challenges issues of authorship, creativity and ownership, whereas videos

produced out of the continuous editing of still images (Geraci 2012) might question media forms overall. As a result, it might be argued that digital photography is not defined any longer by its frame rates, nor by its medium or final output or, ultimately, upon its quality of signifying the Real. Because of their digital quality, media have lost their dimension of ontological completeness (i.e.: the diachronic progression from the latent picture to the photograph) upon the temporariness of the digital code and its remix quality. As a consequence, the digital photograph not only lacks a preferred production medium (i.e.: mobile phones versus cameras), representative form (i.e.: onscreen and printed photographs) or format (i.e.: its dependence on other media to signify), but a comprehensive ontology. In fact, the same digital file might be post-produced in a virtually infinite number of ways, over distinct and separate media, and for diverse purposes. Furthermore, its distributive dynamics will reproduce the same 'image' for very different social contexts and on rather diverse media (smartphones, public billboard, computers). In other words, the 'digital photograph' is never finished, nor completed: this suggests the extent to which a medium (the digital photograph) is now best understood as that which signifies without a form or a medium consistency.

In such a context, the production of the digital photograph might be accessed as an introductory stage to a much wider and dramatically un-refined practice of signification. Aesthetics might be used to signify both still (i.e. photographs) and moving images (i.e. videos) upon the variety of their hybrid forms and formats. The temporariness of these results has finally convinced me to appreciate the digital photograph as that which has semantics without ontology, and use Mitchell's juxtaposition between the picture and the image as the mere physical support and its portrayed content (Mitchell 2005b: 85).

In such a context, he also advises of the extent to which

the word *image* is notoriously ambiguous. It can denote a physical object (a painting or sculpture) and a mental, imaginary entity, a psychological *imago*, the visual content of dreams, memories and perceptions. It plays a role in both visual and verbal arts, as the name of the represented content of a picture or its overall formal *gestalt* [...] or it can designate a verbal motif, a named thing or quality, a metaphor or other “figure,” or even the formal totality of a text as a “verbal icon.” It can even pass over the boundary between vision and hearing in the notion of an “acoustic image” (Mitchell 2005b: 2).

### ***Aranda’s Case Study – The Endless Debate***

In this section, I will explore at some length the 2012 awarded photograph of Samuel Aranda, better known as the Yemenite *Pieta*, to conclude my contextualization of signs, symbols and simulacra. Aranda’s photograph has triggered an extremely lively and, from time to time, quite contested debate on Orientalism and the role of photography in practices and policies of signification. I will intertwine my notes mainly with those of David Campbell’s review (Campbell 2012) to fully contextualise my argument on the photograph as ‘semantics without ontology.’



© Samuel Aranda / Corbis, 2012.

A most recurrent critique of the image has been one of Orientalism as best summarised in Vroons: to support such an analysis, the image has been paralleled to Simona Ghizzoni's, who was also awarded for the same edition of the World Press Photo competition.



© Simona Ghizzoni, 2012.

Allegedly, both photographs depict

the picturesque style of 19th century Orientalist painting, stressing the mystique and timelessness of the scenery, defining the Orient as a geographical region with strong dramatic and aesthetic qualities; a subliminal place that lacks context and therefore can never be fully understood. Or better, unveiled (Vroons 2012).

Vroons expresses his concerns about the Orientalist stance still dominant within imageries coming from the wider Muslim world as “exclusively produced by Western photographers” (Vroons 2012), or by ‘local’ photographers according to ‘Western’ standards. In contrast, David Campbell argues how “local photographers [might] have a distinctive eye” (Campbell 2011a) and produce alternative aesthetics in response to current processes of globalisation and multifaceted identities (see below). Campbell’s scepticism echoes Joerg Colberg’s considerations on how we

helplessly stare at all these images to *project* what we already know onto them. Samuel Aranda’s photograph provides a good opportunity: it’s easy to see the veil, it’s easy to see the pose (the expression of human suffering and of compassion), it’s easy to see (or at least somewhat realize) the very specifically Western visual imagery. But it’s quite a bit harder to put all that together and to then find out what we are really looking at (Colberg 2012a, emphasis added).

Nina Berman raises more wider issues of gender when she states that

[in] the Western media, we seldom see veiled women in this way, at such an intimate moment. It is as if all of the events of the Arab Spring resulted in this single moment – in moments like this (Berman 2011).

Confronted in a particularly harsh debate, Nina “challenged critics to suggest images that, while strong photographically, also both *underscored the role of women* in the protests and avoided clichés of gesticulating/screaming/rock throwing demonstrators” (quoted in Johnson 2012, emphasis added). Nina has been a strong advocate for the social role of

photojournalism and often addressed gender policies through her lens. In this specific case, one could debate the extent to which politics might have hijacked all other issues as she motivates her preference for images which would “underscore the role of women (why women, only?) and [avoid] stereotypes.” Is Nina researching a simulacrum of her policies?

Another member of the Jury, Koyo Kouoh, supports the extent to which Aranda’s photograph

is a photo that *speaks for the entire region*. It stands for Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, for all that happened in the Arab Spring. But it shows a private, intimate side of what went on. And it shows the role that women played, not only as caregivers, but as active people in the movement (Kouoh 2011, emphasis added).

A further participant to the Jury focuses on how the

photo is the result of a very human moment, but it also reminds us of something important, that women played a crucial part in this revolution. It is easy to portray the aggressiveness of situations like these. This image shows the tenderness that can exist within all the aggression. The violence is still there, but it shows another side (Deghati 2011).

The debate on Aranda’s picture has encompassed a wide array of interpretations with distinctive signs, symbols, simulacra and projections: Aranda’s shot serves as a symbol for the whole region, the role of women, the persistent ‘Western’ gaze defining the Orient, and many more. The Jury arguably approached Aranda’s work through a different pattern, Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, to *name* the representation.



*Michelangelo's Pieta.*

Aranda's photograph fitted consistently with previous templates as illustrated by James Nachtwey's campaign against TBC in Cambodia, and Eugene Smith's work in Minamata.



© James Nachtwey /VII.





© Eugene Smith.

*The New York Times* blog on photography contributed to the debate focusing mainly on the 'painterly' quality of the photograph, arguably displacing concerns on media forms: signifying a photograph by reference to a sculpture might in fact raise issues of material consistency even when the *Pieta* is approached as an archetype, and hence as a visual representation.

Even though Aranda's photograph continues to be known as the Yemenite *Pieta*, its signifying space remains widely contested overall: issues at stake are multiple and involve many agencies, from the photographer to the audience and media. BBC interviewed Fatima al-Qaws, the 'Mother' in the photograph; she recalls the memories of what happened the day her son, Zayed, was injured during an anti-government protest in Sana'a. She went to the hospital and

I looked among the dead people and among the wounded. I went around many times and finally I found him in a small hall not far from the mosque. He had difficulty breathing and I knew that he had suffocated from the tear gas thrown

earlier on. So I just took him into my arms and held him very close to me [...] I wasn't aware of what was happening around me, my concern was my son (Coomes 2012).

In the same article, BBC photo editor Phil Coomes defines the image as

a powerful picture, both in terms of the content and aesthetics. The pose has been likened to Michelangelo's *Pieta* and the Renaissance style of lighting elevates it from an illustrative news picture to something that has a heritage (Coomes 2012).

Overall Coomes appears rather cautious in drawing a parallel with the *Pieta*, as he is aware of the difficulties of relating two so distant historical and religious worlds. Furthermore, the extent to which it is a common practice to find in images what one already knows has proved particularly relevant for the debate: this is the reason why

we need to see through symbols, but in both senses of the verb: to use them to see more than we might see otherwise, and to recognize and look past their limitations to see what they would distort or occlude (Shaw 2012).

In such a context, the possibility to interpret the photograph upon the personal elaboration of one's own personal archetype, with its implicit prejudices and obsessions, should be constantly monitored: to advocate symbolic spaces of signification should be approached attentively rather than tentatively. I do not aim to limit the evocative power of the photograph as I recognise the troubling dimension of visual communication as that which *makes* a photograph shot in Yemen speak for the whole region or stand for all that happened in the Arab Spring. In my view, a photograph might be intended to *work* as an evocative symbol, but cannot *be* a symbol. Likewise, it should be approached through a documentary style and not as a photographic document.

### ***Aranda's Photographic Identities***

In the digital framework of today's globalised communication, new audiences have started joining the discussion, contributing to larger processes of significations. As well as the main protagonists of the photograph, Zayed Al-Qawas and his mother, bloggers and photographers alike are joining the conversation to turn a personal composition, the photograph, into an orchestra: by doing so they have the capability to influence the photograph digestion and enrich its understanding and contextualisation while balancing over-personalised or simulated interpretations. As an example, what might the following contributions add to the discussion and signification of the photograph?

We feel proud of this photo because it is very important for the world to have a new impression of Yemen. The foreign media has been presenting Yemenis as terrorists but this is the first time Yemen's beautiful and expressive side has been shown (Nadia Abdulla, Yemeni photographer in (Nicholl 2011)).

It sums up what the Yemeni nation and the rest of Arab [and non- Arab] revolutionary nations have gone through in pursuit of democracy and freedom (Afrah Nasser, a Yemeni blogger in (Nicholl 2011)).

It is a real support to the revolution. It demonstrates that Yemenis are not extremists. The picture explains everything. The picture really explains the love of the mother, and the wounded son, and what happened on that day in Yemen (Zayed Al-Qawas, 'the suffering son' in (Nicholl 2011)).

It makes me very happy to see this picture, to see also that it has won such a prestigious award. It makes me happy and very proud: proud for being a woman, proud for being a mother, and also for being a Yemeni woman. I'm very proud that this photo is going around the world and many people have seen it and will continue seeing it. And especially it makes me even happier because it's Western people who have chosen that picture for the award (Fatima Al-Qawas, Zayed's mother in (Nicholl 2011)).

Possibly, all the testimonies above might reinforce an appraisal of the photograph as a temporary and endless semantic activity: through a single sign, the photographer is

capable of suggesting many concurrent and even conflicting significations and, hence, *substantiates all and nothing*: concurrently, each new contribution inscribes and supports the social interpretation of the photograph with the peril of rendering it un-intelligible because of its cacophonous eco. To contain the above proliferation, Aranda joined the discussion and explicitly clarified the extent to which he shot that photograph *un-aware*:

it was really tense and chaotic. In these situations, you just shoot photos. It is what it is. We're just photographers [...] I just witness what is going on in front of me, and shoot photos. That's it (BJP 2012).

Aranda's comment offers the opportunity for a final acknowledgement of aesthetics and awareness: his words testify the extent to which each photograph is a fragile and phenomenologically informed architecture of features, some of which might be truly undetected or unconsciously noticed at the moment of the signification of the Real. Contrary to LAIF's wishes, there is no real meaning for a photograph nor the intentions of the photographer might be unequivocally asserted. There are numerous cases in which ethics might be consciously and purposely misuse with original aims and intended significations truly reverted: many of the Benetton's campaigns to promote social changes, particularly those on AIDS and death penalty are revealing examples.



David Kirby's Final Moments

Photo © 1990 Therese Frare

*Toscani's Pieta. Original file in black and white. Source: <http://www.boumbang.com>.*

Coincidentally, Toscani too produced his version of a Pieta: out of a black and white photojournalistic composition he thoroughly post-produced the photograph in colour to turn it into a billboard advertisement.



*Toscani's Pieta. Post-produced image in colour. Source: <http://www.boumbang.com>.*

For what we know, Aranda might have shot a whole series of photographs, some aesthetically and/or semantically successful, others less so, as it happened with Walski. He decided to submit *that* specific one (signification of the Real), and we will never know the extent of his intentional reference to Michelangelo's work, or, in other words, of his intended signification of the representation. It could be argued too that his being Spanish, and hence part of a consistent Catholic cultural heritage, might have informed him with a latent but fully framed Catholic imagery: hence, my constant reference to psychoanalytical outlooks. Would it have been different had he been born in Rome, Moscow or Wittenberg? Is the author's identity manageable and relevant to the signification of the Real and that of the representation?

As the photographer is endlessly framing the signification of the Real, she alters aesthetics with a slight movement of the head. By recognising a different communicative rhythm she can "find and focus on [that] particular subject within the mass of reality" (Cartier-Bresson 1999: 32): with a simple detail, she *creates* a thoroughly distinct communication. Hence Campbell differentiates between the image production, which is "just that: *the production of an image*" (Campbell 2012, emphasis in the original) and the following signification process. He argues that the Real

is not copied by the camera, it takes on meaning through the whole apparatus of photographic practices that culminate in – but are not limited to – someone releasing the shutter. Photography is much more than what the photograph 'is.' The meaning that results in part from the image is not limited to either details within the frame or the intentions/self-understanding of the photographer (Campbell 2012).

As I have set out above, the variety and richness of the photograph's interpretations is truly never-ending. In the case of Aranda's shot, audiences have referred to it

as a Christian icon, a 19th century orientalist painting, a sculptural form, a depoliticization of the Arab Spring, evidence of the hegemonic Western eye, a sign of a bloody conflict, a rendering of universal humanity, a personal moment of compassion, an affirmation of the strength of Islamic women, and an image whose beauty forces us to look (Campbell 2012).

In such a context, I have devised my notion of photography as semantics without ontology because

photographs are polysemic and polyvalent – as part of their condition, they are inescapably open to multiple readings, and can often sustain different if not contradictory readings. The proliferation of clashing interpretations demonstrates the naturalist faith is untenable. If a photograph were just what it 'is' there would be nothing to discuss and the pictures' public role would be minimal at best (Campbell 2012).

Photographs are part and substantiate diverse, converging and oppositional temporary significations which are fragments of an atomised incomplete Real the photographer signifies *hic et nunc*. Intended significations of the representation as a symbol or a simulacrum remain temporary and phenomenologically limited. When audiences enter the field of signification they further contribute to it by personalising Revealing Indexes out of the available Puncta to create their own autonomous significations. Finally, not only different audiences might decode the same sign in multiple ways and, upon these, finalise multiple significations: the same audience might actually *produce* diverse and distinct interpretations because of her diverse sensorial engagements *hic et nunc*.

## IDENTITIES AND ORIENTALISM

As explored with Aranda's work, Orientalism remains a latent, implicit and powerful interpretative pattern. Zizek recognises the extent to which there is a consistent "difference between imaginary and symbolic identification" (Zizek 1989: 106), and this is particularly true *for whom* such identification takes place.

Shaheen's encyclopaedia on Hollywood's depiction of the Arabs in film production is particularly revealing (Shaheen 2009). Even though it is an extremely valid exploration of long-established patterns and stereotypes, its author tends to address communicative nuances and dynamics only in a very limited manner. For instance, he does so for the opening sequence of the 1988's *The Naked Gun* film by not recognising the explicit irony against the same patterns of representation he criticises. He tags the work with 'cameos' and 'villains,' and argues that Arabs are ridiculed because they get punched by Lt. Frank Drebin (Nielsen) while they plot on how to best "punish America." However, the Arabs are just two out of the seven villains and, quite shockingly, Shaheen does not mention how Nielsen falls from the window performing the character of the hero who threatens the 'enemies' not to "ever let me catch you guys in America" (Shaheen 2009: 370).

Without arguing too long Shaheen's reduced concern in analysing multimedia visual semantics, I only wish to add how the movie emerged as an explicit spin-off to an American series ridiculing not those on the screen but those behind it and their long-repeated patterns of heroes, scenes and narratives: the tone should have been rather clear to all US viewers and, after a while, to anyone appreciating the college-like sense of humour informing that movie and its *genre* of reference.

Cases like this have been quite frequent as reviewers even misplaced the Orientalism of Lean's 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia*: Steven Caton (Caton 1999) and Martin Stollery (Stollery



2000) address extensively how the director's representation of Arab culture wanted to challenge familiar stereotypes of the "sophisticated" West against the "uncivilized" East: in this movie, Lawrence wishes to become an Arab and does not invite Arabs to enter the 'educated' British Empire. Caton argues the film criticism towards the colonialist project within the constraints of the historical (post-Suez) and cultural contexts from which it emerged (Caton 1999: 199). Through reference to first-hand documents from Lean, he clarifies how it is the Ottomans who are represented as inefficient, ruthless, or perverted, and not the Arabs: Arabs are shown to fight bravely and in conditions of clear inferiority to attain their freedom from the colonialist yoke of Ottoman rule. Hence, issues of visual semantics (whom to 'orientalise') should be pointed out very attentively as Lean uses the Ottomans merely to better articulate the Arab and British characters.

In order to deal with the possible proliferation of endless gazes, semantic deviations and unconscious significations of my work, I have relied on audience response sessions as one-to-one occasions to have audiences to feed me back. Hence, I have been testing my images, both as stand-alone elements and as comprehensive photo essay narratives to explore the extent to which intended significations might be thoroughly personalised and projected: if Orientalism is such a constitutive and underlying pattern, then which possibilities do I have to signify my work autonomously?

### ***Marco's Press Conference***

The discussion I had with Marco, an Italian professional journalist working for one of the major Italian news corporations, will introduce a crucial issue, namely the extent to which images might be *thoroughly* signified as Revealing Indexes of fully un-predictable Puncta: photograph mafu\_20100302\_0020 became the occasion to develop how intended significations might be informed by one's own personal background.



*mafu\_20100302\_0020. Post-Produced Image © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

The image has been received and interpreted in a fairly consistent manner, even though a number of alternative meanings have been articulated against my intended one, the representation of a scene in a Hawza class. Marco, a fluent speaker of Mandarin with many years of work in Asia, interpreted the photograph as a press conference. Bewildered by his interpretation, he explained in detail that the overall aesthetics of the image reminded him of a press conference because of the arranged perspective from behind the participants with a speaker in the front. The main character on the left of the frame is writing notes, which might further support Marco's point, even though a student would have rather predictably read it differently.

Having photographed press conferences for some time as a photojournalist, I definitely acknowledge the presence of such a visual 'pattern' upon its distinct aesthetics. The following pictures are just few of the many examples echoing Marco's interpretation.



*Google results for "press conference." © The related owners and website publishers.*



*Google results for "press conference." © The related owners and website publishers.*



*Google results for "press conference." © The related owners and website publishers.*



*Google results for "press conference." © The related owners and website publishers.*





*Google results for “press conference.” © The related owners and website publishers.*



*Google results for “press conference.” © The related owners and website publishers.*

However, none of the previously interviewed people ever signified the image in the same manner, even though a few had specific competences in institutional photojournalism. I asked myself whether my background as a photojournalist influenced my shooting, and, then, the extent to which my previous expertise might have shaped its overall framing.

Hence, I began questioning whether some sort of Jungian archetype might have found its way to *unconsciously* make me signify the Real in that specific way; an alternative possibility might have been that I *consciously* decided to take that image to evoke, if not connote, my experience at the Hawza. In order to confront such an intricate discussion, I have capitalised on my double role as both photographer and analyst: this has allowed me to explicitly enunciate my significations against those of the audiences.

In the specific case of mafu\_20100302\_0020, I can assert unequivocally that I signified the Real upon the limited freedom of movement I was allowed at the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab. As I mentioned, I would be allowed to photograph as long as I did not disturb the class, and needed to behave actively without bending my gained permit too much. My signification of the representation was in line with that of my Real as I aimed to represent a scene at the Hawza. Later, something got 'broken' in the model of communication as Marco interpreted my photograph as a "press conference." In such a context, I began wondering whether still images might be prisms reflecting the audience much more than the photographic content. However, as I stated above, my focus is not on innovating the Rorschach inkblot test through photography or delve into psychoanalytic analysis; instead, I will assess the 'Spanish Case' as a further case study in photographic signification.

### ***The Spanish Case – Orientalism As A Fault***

The present section contextualises the overwhelmingly positive remarks to my research against the comments of a Spanish scholar on Islam I engaged in Damascus. In one of my audience response sessions I recorded his strongest criticism to my photo essay as he defined it as "patronising and deeply misrepresenting daily elements of their [the Hawza students] lives" (Spanish 2010). Such a powerful and confrontational signification of my work fully stimulated my curiosity; I invited the scholar to discuss his positions and explain

to me his disappointment to which he answered with a polite refusal and the invitation to deal better with criticism.

There is always a general disposition of courtesy and politeness towards a photographer (but I am equally sure it can be extended to any communicative form) once she presents her work. I expected my audience response sessions to be somehow influenced by my double role as photographer and interviewer, and would assume that negative remarks would be toned down if not avoided. My sampled audiences encompassed a wide array of socio-political and religious 'types,' who would be largely identifiable as both 'Western' and 'Muslim.' Even among the latter ones, my work was consistently appreciated in very positive terms as – and I quote randomly – “very instructive on the life of my brothers,” and “a very honest and respectful work of representation.” I have cross-tested people who had converted to Islam, a number of those who would not consider themselves particularly religious, and some who would describe themselves as “fiercely atheist:” except for the Spanish scholar all of them reacted very positively to my work. Such a strongly motivated criticism hit me on a personal level, as it questioned my theoretical perspective and visual research by accusing me of patronizing and misrepresenting my photographic subject. Was I really doing so, even at an unconscious level, or communicating something I was not aware of? Was I orientalisng the subject of my images?

While further exploring the issue, I realised that I was not in a position to redraft my research plan and run a new round of cross-checked interviews. The increasingly tense political situation was deteriorating and I would not be credible as a uninvolved researcher testing a tiny community which knew everything about everyone. My research was also attracting too much attention, and I was aware of how both the Hawzas and the Syrian *mukhabarat* (the Secret Police) were becoming increasingly concerned and suspicious about my activities. Hence, I decided to deal with the Spanish case study through a new

round of audience response sessions with people I had previously interviewed: by explicitly addressing a different editing of my photograph (see the following section on montage), I would cross-check the extent to which my intended sets of signification might have been disrupted by external factors. Because of the various constraints involved (time and budget, alongside political and social concerns), the new round of audience sessions was limited to ten elements: all interviews consistently reiterated a thorough appreciation for my work. Those findings left my case unresolved as I was searching for alternative causalities: if it were not the montage or the photograph itself, I began to wonder whether the Spanish criticism might have been motivated by personal or projective significations.

I discussed the issue with a few friends who knew the Spanish scholar, explaining the issue in detail, how it was affecting my research question, and its very specific consequences. Through a series of separate discussions, I came to learn the extent to which the Spanish scholar was experiencing a very difficult time in Damascus, both at a personal and professional level: this led me to motivate his very negative signification upon the unconscious transfer (Jung 1995: 159) of his personal situation on anything vaguely related to Syria. I suspected that the strong disenchantment with his experience in Damascus was signifying anything directly or indirectly part of the Muslim world. As we were both white Europeans, he would then rely on the Orientalist tag to unconsciously relieve himself from any responsibility: all interviewed people agreed with my conclusions.

Following up on Marco's signification, the 'Spanish Case' complements my assessment on the extent to which audiences might signify by reference to what is outside the frame (personal or background experience) instead of what is within it.



### ***Photographs As 'Selfie'***

The next case study focuses on the notes I gathered from the first of my two collective audience response sessions to explore forms of personalization in photographic communication. I used a seminar event with experts on Islam and scholars on the Hawza to target my projected audience of 'Western' researchers (BA 2010).

As usual, I first showed my photographic essay and then opened the floor for the Q&A session, supporting the photographic essay with a very brief background to my three Damascus case studies, namely the Theological Institute of Sayyeda Ruqayya and the Sayyeda Zaynab and Al-Qaim Hawzas. Even though this should have been sufficient to contextualise the research framework, it rather immediately proved the opposite: within the first five photographs, participants began to enquire after the details of the locations, trying to situate *my* intended narrative within the terms of *their* previous experiences. I discussed their linking a photograph to the specific subject they had read about before as a process of transformation of the image into a 'selfie:' this immediately reminded me of the most common answer one gets when showing a photograph. As Barthes magnificently exposes in his *Camera Lucida*, "show your photographs to someone – he will immediately show you his: 'Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child,' etc." (Barthes 2010: 5). I was showing them *my* photograph, they were *telling* me their stories.

As a result I began evaluating usage of the verbal medium to anchor signification dynamics. By questioning how I could communicate 'effectively' I will assess the *Simulacrum of the Blind* as a case study in 'multimedia' communication and apply my findings for a 'mixed' media case as exemplified by the *Time Management* photograph.

### ***The Simulacrum Of The Blind***

Mitchell assesses the relationship between text and image as the fundamental question of current visual studies (Mitchell 1994; Mitchell 2005b) and suggests the extent to which the whole of contemporary communication should be appreciated as 'mixed' (Mitchell 2005a). It follows that whether and how to caption photographs or verbally inform the photo essay becomes of pivotal relevance. I have contextualised the extent to which the same sign can be communicated as both a symbol and a simulacrum. This is equally true for both analogue and digital photography, but is much more relevant for the latter because of its newly acquired cultural centrality. In this section, I further contextualise a few issues on the policies of representation of the sign, the symbol and the simulacrum for 'mixed' communication.

The following photographs depict the same scene in one of my sessions at the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab. As the file names suggest, they are three consecutive moments, and reproduce the same scene and the same context, in basically the same moment and from the same perspective: I shot them in a continuous mode as I was aiming to find what I would appreciate as the decisive moment. These images will epitomise the extent to which a photograph might be 'fallacious' or 'fake' even when no post-production is pursued.



*mafu\_20100313\_0009. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100313\_0010. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*



*mafu\_20100313\_0011. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

The main subject in the photograph is the man occupying the left half of the frame; in some photographs his eyes are open, in others they are closed. Photograph 0009 arranges a very intense portrait of a man perhaps lost in his thoughts if not absorbed by what he is listening to; 0011 depicts the same figure rubbing his eyes, possibly to keep his concentration, and in 0010 his eyes are open. All three portraits fail to say that he is a blind man: arguably, the seeable is not capable to inform on it unless the portrait is frontally arranged, clearly an issue of wider aesthetics. In such a context, I could have produced a symbol or a simulacrum with any of the three photographs: by combining the photograph with a caption, I would pursue distinct intended policies of communication either in the form of the symbol or the simulacrum. For instance:



*mafu\_20100313\_0009. A blind student attending the Thursday evening lecture.*

This text/image combination suggests a strongly directed communication in the form of a simulacrum. I could research a more symbolic combination as for the following case:



*mafu\_20100313\_0009. A student fully focused at the Thursday evening lecture.*



Both cases rely on the same photograph but intend a different signification through their captions: arguably, both text/image combinations present a diverse degree of simulation, and represent just two among many alternative possibilities. For instance a third possibility might be the following.



*mafu\_20100313\_0010. A student fully focused at the Thursday evening lecture.*

*Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

The last example does not hint in any way at the subject's blindness, but does not rule it out either as his eyes are open and do not suggest any particular condition (compare this to Mentor's). Rather expectedly, using the same verbal caption for a different visual text produces distinct results: overall, I prefer the first photograph, 0009, as it uses the informative element of his eyes closed to evoke the ungraspable feeling of passion students put in their study. I checked my notes and those confirmed that he stayed with his eyes closed most of the time: 0010 depicts a very rare moment in which his eyes are open. I intend to evoke a specifically intended Revealing Index, that of the students'

concentration, through a different Punctum (the blindness of the student): I have stated the truth upon a lie, or, rather, an implicit imprecision.

Concurrently, photographing a blind man who was not in a position to negotiate the terms of his portrait raises relevant issues of ethics. He was accompanied into the room just before the beginning of the class, and could sit only in front of me; he was most probably unaware of my camera, and hence I might be accused of treating him as an 'object,' and having exploited him. I remain aware of my questionable choice even though I feel I have not mistreated him. My photographic representation has not been un-respectful to him in any manner, nor I indicated his condition to the point that not a single person ever saw him as a blind person but only as a focused student. Actually, he is both blind and focused, and I signified the Real and, concurrently, my representation, using one to convey the other. In the end, I wish to argue the extent to which I can produce an unethical representation upon a symbolic signification of the Real. Conversely, I can fabricate a thoroughly 'fair' simulacrum while I intentionally misrepresent its subject or caption her in a way similar to what happened with Mentor.

These two case studies, the blind student and Mentor, should suffice to indicate how ethics is autonomous from signification dynamics: Mentor's image has been ethically shot with all permits as much as the blind man was not. However, in the first case the signification of the representation was arranged to produce an un-ethical simulacrum whereas the blind man served to signify an ethical symbol. It is of no use to pretend a 'true' signification of the Real against a 'fake' signification of the representation as the central role acquired by the digital photograph in today's communication prescribes the assessment of the two together as constituents of a more inclusive communicative framework.

I have photographed a blind man to epitomise the rather ungraspable state of a student concentrating in a class. Possibly his condition might have contributed to the communicative quality of my image much more than his attention span. Concurrently, I did not shoot the photograph with all this in mind but as I liked its framing and aesthetics. Within a non-fictional setting, decisions are often taken in a fraction of a second and might be the result of a stroke of luck rather than any intentionality: this is the uniqueness of photographing 'real' events. The following image is to me the best example of how the photographer might 'dance' around the scene, studying the situation while waiting for things to happen and finally might end up with a completely distinct result from any intended one. I was in Cairo and I saw a man eating with his back against the street surrounded by a group of cats in spasmodic awaiting of any leftover. I stopped, I waited and I photographed when I foresaw that my 'decisive moment' was about to come. The image below does not relate in any way to what I mentally pictured: I had no control or anticipation of how he was about to throw a piece of food and how a cat might jump to grab it. I was lucky, as I could have waited for that action to happen without it ever happening. I could have staged it, but even so the cats might have refused to cooperate and that story would have never happened. How is possible to frame this phenomenological manifestation within a theory of semantics?





*mafu\_20131112\_0496 Un-Post Produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

As Aranda and Campbell have already evinced, the signification of the Real is a rather independent activity from the signification of the representation. The first without the latter would be merely a 'latent picture' as much as the second cannot exist without the former: these processes arrange together the stand-alone communicative field of the photograph. Such a semantic *field* is inscribed with ethical issues and power relations: as much as the photographer might aim to signify through a specific symbol or simulacrum, audiences might renegotiate them differently for a wide array of distinct significations. The overwhelming dimension of today's digital archives matches the cultural relevance of its social usage: in such an expanding and highly contentious space, aesthetics rests as my pivotal semantic practice.

### ***Time Management – The Verbal Within***

I have chosen *Time Management* as my final case study because it is the only photograph which explicitly mixes verbal with visual media: beside the cover of the book *Time*

*Management* on the right, it also introduces on the left an open page of the Qur'an. It might be argued how this content might go undetected, ignored or misinterpreted among uninformed audiences, but I will be contextualising it through the discussion I had with the participants at the 2010 British Academy event (BA 2010): even though a few participants to the conference, and I include myself, might have not been able to read it fluently, nevertheless no one in the room would have failed to understand which book it was. In the middle, between the two books, there are two *muhr-e Karbala*, the clay tablets used during prayer, which are the object of special veneration for Shi'a Muslims as they are made from the revered earth of Karbala in Iraq. Hence, the *muhr-e Karbala* can be appreciated as a defining constituent to the daily practice of any Shi'a Muslim: at prayer times, when the believer bows, the head touches the ground mediated by the sacred power carried by the tablet. Because of the specific need for this object during prayer activities, it perfectly fits within practices of daily time management of the Shi'a believer, whose daily schedule is articulated around the three main prayers.



*mafu\_20100302\_0051. The Time Management Case Study.*

*Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

The photograph has generated very contrasting ‘storytelling,’ as it was signified, among many concurrent ones, as “artificially constructed,” “the successful synthesis of a multitude of diverse religious elements” and “an ironic statement.” Overall, the photograph enjoyed a central place at the British Academy event and a rather constant consideration in all audience response sessions. I explain such a devoted attention upon the logocentric quality of the photograph; interviews with all my audiences confirmed that even when they did not understand or could not read the text, nevertheless they would assess its Arabic alphabet and, by extension, its Islamic dimension.

In such a context, the book cover presents a hybrid composition that puts English and Arabic words side by side: hence, it is not only mixed communication, but alphabetically (Arabic and Latin) and linguistically (Arabic and English) mixed too. Arguably, even when audiences could not recognise the same title in two languages, nevertheless they would identify the viscosity of the Arabic script; rather ironically, it could be argued that, following the 9/11 events, the over-exposed coverage of ‘Muslims’ and ‘Islam’ led the recognition of its defining codes, and possibly increased its ‘popularity.’ Because of its hybrid text the photograph informs and communicates among Arabic-speaking audiences as much as to ‘Western’ ones. Similarly, the central position of the two *muhr-e Karbala* visually informs the photograph’s composition and suggests the decoding of the photograph from both right to left and left to right: this proved particularly relevant when exploring the juxtaposition between ‘Western’ and ‘Muslim’ gazes (below).

I signified the Real upon the synchronic appearance in a single frame of three elements denoting the Hawza: the Qur’an, the two *muhr-e Karbala*, and the book *Time Management* all signify the Hawza as a scholarly social space and a seminary. As much as the Qur’an undoubtedly defines the space as Muslim, the two clay tablets suggests its Shi’a dimension, and *Time Management* invites, among many concurrent elements, the

appreciation of its scholarly quality. All three Puncta converge to epitomise the Hawza or, at least, this is how I arranged my intended communication. However, recognition of how I intended my signification of the representation might prove irrelevant to my audiences' significations. As previously mentioned, the photograph was of little value to me but I soon realised the extent to which I could stimulate audiences' comments upon it: I analysed, recorded and tracked audiences' reactions to explore possible identity patterns.

Overall, 'Western' audiences would interpret the photograph *Time Management* as a joke and an ironic comment on my experience at the Hawza. This would apply to audiences who previously had some sort of experience of the Muslim world as much as to those who had never experienced any Muslim or Islamic social context. The former would use the photograph to recollect their own anecdotes, and share with me the occasions in which they wasted long hours waiting. The latter would corroborate their understanding through reference to stories they had previously heard, holidays at Sharm El-Sheikh, episodes of *Homeland* or the movie *Sex And The City 2*. Had they previously heard about my own experience at the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab, they would equally motivate their significations upon my own stories of endless negotiations and infinite delays.

At the same time, as all scholars on Islam well know, the issue of time management fully informs Islamic teleology and might be rather functional to contrast public perceptions with informed understandings. If for the present context I define as 'Muslim' those audiences who have a direct knowledge or some basic familiarity with its theological concerns independently from any personal belief, then my data suggest how Muslim audiences would not identify any irony in the representation. However, these qualitative findings might be easily contested as they fall into objectifying audiences, and do not recognise the sensorial quality that complex, multi-layered identities endlessly affirm (see below): they proved of good value only insofar as they allowed me to question a specific signification.

### ***Multimedia, Identities and Staged Significations***

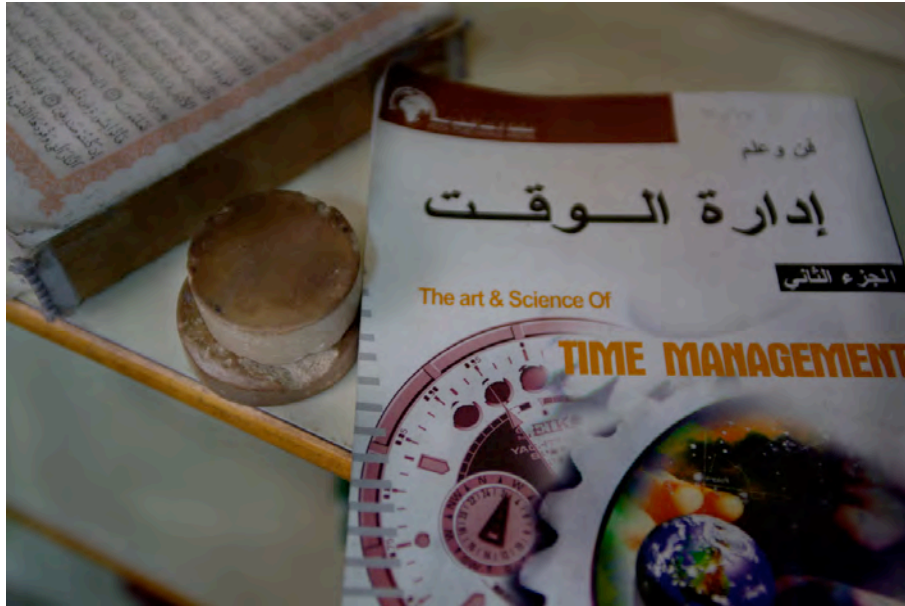
Despite the many doubts about its authenticity, the photograph *Time Management* has not been artificially arranged in any way: I was in fact blessed with such a serendipitous composition. However, I intend to use this image to come back to the issue of the ethnographic Real against any 'staged real,' and contextualise the privileged position of aesthetics within practices of signification.

The photograph was shot in the library of the Hawza Sayyeda Zaynab. I spent the morning shooting a portrait of Sayyed Abu Adib. After an hour or so of following his activities, I parted from him as he had further duties in an area where I would not be allowed. I lay down on the carpet, closed my eyes and enjoyed the silence and the quietness of the place at class time, with all the students away. After a while, I got up and looked for some B-rolls, a practice borrowed from video production: it indicates when the research subject is further complemented with secondary features. For instance, if I were producing an interview, I would record a few extra scenes, the B-rolls, to use them when editing a scene shift or to offer an alternative visual background to the narrator's voice. While looking for my B-rolls at the library, I encountered the *Time Management* image. I gasped in excitement and photographed mafu\_20100302\_0050.



*mafu\_20100302\_0050. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

I signified the Real through the centrality of the *Time Management* book and used the *muhr-e Karbala* with the Qur'an as functional elements to close off the frame and keep the attention on the book in the front right corner. However, I remembered that form is content, and looked for a more articulated composition:



*mafu\_20100302\_0051. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia.*

As already addressed in my section on the Signification of the Real, the two shots suggest diverse communication even if they reproduce exactly the same three informative components (see Hassan's shisha): however, by altering the form, content is influenced, and the more aware the process, the more its impact is manageable. The above photograph epitomises a new case in which form, and with that I refer to compositional practices at large, changes content, and begins the signification of the representation: aesthetics is thus beginning to be identified as that which encompasses all communicative choices.

Marco and the Spanish case made me aware of the extent to which un-expected Puncta might inform, influence or thoroughly shape personal memories (Folman 2008: 00:09:30 – 00:10:43), and how processes of personal signification should be contextualised within larger sensorial frameworks. As an example, a recent study on 9/11 survivors, the Manhattan Memory Project (Manhattan Memory Project 2013) has recognised the

presence of a brain region responsible for creating remarkable picture-like recollections. These so-called flashbulb memories have been assessed as healing practices produced *autonomously* and *unconsciously* to balance the pain of personal / social traumas: not only we think about them and interact with them, but we perceive them as fully accurate to the point that these memories *become* our past (Finkenauer 1998; Hamzelou 2011). In such a context, the possibility of being influenced by diverse engagements of our personal history should be attentively considered, particularly for highly sensitive issues such as, increasingly today, Islam; because of the traumatic signifying space of today's Islam, flashbulb memories are capable of altering significations both in accordance or in opposition to mainframe patterns. Eventually, the unique way the photograph communicates, as both a stand-alone medium and in conjunction to other media forms like the caption or within montage practices (see below), renders univocal receptions thoroughly questionable: the possibility for digital photography to be un-constrained semantics is unparalleled.

### ***The Phenomenological Identity***

The phenomenological space through which identities engage cultural products adds a further layer of complexities to signification practices. Marco's understanding of my Hawza photograph as a press conference was not purely theoretical or coincidental. He explicitly confirmed to me the extent to which his experience was thoroughly informed with the sensorial dimension he lived while relating to the photograph: because and through his engagement with it, he *lived* once more the sensorial experience of attending boring press conferences while wishing to be in China and dinking tea on the floor. As Jacobi (above) pointed out, the Cross does not represent the Christ, *is it* the Christ.



In order to approach this semantic space of signification I will refer to Merleau-Ponty and his invitation to “rediscover the world in which we live [...] as we perceive it, the ‘perceived world’” (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 6). It follows that

it is our ‘bodily’ intentionality which brings the possibility of meaning into our experience by ensuring that its content, the things presented in experience, are surrounded with references to the past and the future, to other places and other things, to human possibilities and situations (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 9).

Merleau-Ponty, unlike “Descartes, holds that the perceived world is the ‘real’ world” (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 14). By referring back to “Husserl’s thesis that ‘transcendental subjectivity is inter-subjectivity,’” he argues that “there is no coherent conception of self-consciousness which is not regulated by the consciousness that others have of us” (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 23). In such a theoretical framework, the “world is not what I think, but what I *live through*” (Merleau-Ponty 2011: xviii, emphasis added): the crucial relevance media might have in crafting perceptions and projections for today’s world should have become explicit by now. Consequently, to Marco my photograph did not seem to be the materialization (even as a digital file on a screen) of an intended communication, but the pivot of a much larger and complex sensorial engagement. In a similar way, both the Spanish scholar and the participants to the British Academy 2010 conference should remind the visual researcher of the extent to which “we find in texts *only* what we put into them” (Merleau-Ponty 2011: viii, emphasis added).

The dichotomy between information and communication has shaped much of my research, and I have argued that the human sciences have mainly, if not uniquely, worked within the terms of an informative paradigm. My communicative approach focuses on intended communication, and it deals solely with what the author says, or intend to show. Informative-based theories of communication tend to assess received information within

the spectrum defined by the two poles of the preferred and the aberrant, and quantify successful rates consequently. The two paradigms are distinct and I have aimed to contribute to research in communication for which the body

is never merely a passive transmitter of messages, but plays an active role in the generation of perceptual meaning [as] a network of lived-through meanings (Coole 2005: 5-7).

It follows that the medium I use not only impacts my representations but thoroughly shapes my significations: the extent to which I feel more confident holding a Canon 5D rather than a Leica M6 has a stance on my signification of the Real, and produces diverse results because of the distinct significance these two media have *for me*. The photograph appears to be the occasion through which temporary agentic capabilities (Coole 2005) reframe the established distinction between content and form, as well as that between subject and object. In such a context, any involved subjectivity overcomes her physical boundaries and becomes a relational inter-subjectivity part of the social field in which all participants 'are' *hic et nunc*.

However, any reference to the notion of agentic capabilities does not lead to the dismissal of a coherent and unique subjectivity; rather, it supports how identities are not autonomous or permanent, but in a continuous state of multiplicity. With the concept of multiplicity, I intend to explicitly recognise the increasing 'schizophrenic' dimension of today's identities; by that I evoke the coexisting presence of a multitude of fully framed traits (male, female, young, old, Italian, Muslim...) temporary arranging themselves through their social engagements. Audiences are not multiple because they are several, but instead "each of us [is] already several" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 3) and endlessly becomes 'something' even though it is never 'something else' or 'something other:' we are always ourselves.

As “potential assemblages in genesis” (Deleuze 1994)

the pre-reflective unity of the body brings a certain continuity to experiences which would otherwise dissipate over time. And because embodiment situates us, each enjoys a relatively unique perspective and hence potential originality (Coole 2005: 8-9).

Hence, human beings are not schizophrenic in the medical understanding of the concept; rather, a single *assemblage* encompasses a multiplicity of identities while being at the same time the very temporary result of a specific and un-permanent framework. As a result, I suggest how any ‘subject’ involved in the communicative field might be best assessed as a communicative hub: with this expression, I recognise the extent to which any subject is the centre of a communicative network through which all possible routes both converge and radiate. The identity of any subject in this temporary framework is thoroughly un-refined as it happens *hic et nunc*, and in a continuous state of re-formulation. All these engagements posit the hub as the pivot through which a (virtually) infinite amount of semantic connections and relations are created, and define its rhizomatic quality as that which “has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21). As Deleuze and Guattari argue through the principles of connection and heterogeneity,

any point of the rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be[.] semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding [...] that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7).

As subjectivities are “defined only by their *state* at a given moment” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 17, emphasis in the original), they exist *hic et nunc* as a phenomenological manifestation: there is “neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and

dimensions” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8). This is the reason why a communicative hub is semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows at the very same time. In fact

there is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation [the photograph] and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a [photograph] has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 22-23).

Once such a theoretical framework is accepted, dynamics of representation and signification are eventually inscribed within a thoroughly phenomenological space: they are axiomatically developed both on the vertical dimension of the subject (the multiplicity of her constituting identities), and horizontally across its becoming in time. In such a thorough temporariness, the photograph becomes one of the *events* through which the communicative hub ‘is.’ The digital photograph is hence assessed as the *locus* of an endless flow of rhizomatic exchanges for which there are no longer either the photograph nor the identity, the subject, the object or the audience, but solely media engagements as “extension of ourselves” (McLuhan 2003: 9): this finally questions any assertive role for the photograph.

### ***Signifying The Photograph – A Recap***

This section has focused on the relation between significations and identities. I have relied on a few case studies from my fieldwork in Syria and Bahrain to explore the extent to which audiences might differently *perform* the representation of the Real. Regardless of any attempt to impose a policy of signification, I had to acknowledge the variety of the diverse components impacting, and possibly diverting, audiences’ engagements following my performance and the overall signification of the Real.

Marco's understanding of my Hawza class as a press conference was paired with the Spanish scholar's response: both suggested how the ultimate Revealing Index for the representation might be found outside the photograph, in one's own background or personal condition.

The *'alims* I tried to photograph such as Sheikh Jafar in Manama, have all actively engaged with my visual research, either consciously or unconsciously: they performed for themselves and for me, as they felt they belonged to, and wanted to further develop the specific tradition and imagery of the *'alim*. By performing the *Talib* (student) or the Sheikh, they arguably became one with their representation (Cuddy 2012). Sartre would probably dismiss these acts as "bad faith" (Cox 2006: 99-101), but this would imply the 'good faith' I reject as an ultimate signifier: to me there are no preferred and aberrant meanings, but only intended significations. As a consequence of that, I have informed my aesthetics with the tactical notion of the verisimilar as preferred to those of 'authentic,' 'staged' or 'realist.'

The complex and intertwined relation between distinct media (verbal and visual) has been contextualised within wider practices in multimedia and mixed communication. Ethics has concurrently been 'dispossessed' of the Real as its ultimate referent, and the Walski case, the *Simulacrum of the Blind* and the debate on Aranda's photograph have all contributed to explore the terms of reference I am introducing towards the final assessment of my idea of the Meta-Image. The next chapter will complete the two-fold practice of signifying the representation by exploring the semantic quality of montage, thus combining the photograph as a stand-alone representation with its usage as part of a hieroglyphic visual narrative.

## **[Chapter Four] Signifying The Representation – The Montage**

## [CHAPTER FOUR]

### SIGNIFYING THE REPRESENTATION – THE MONTAGE

What actually is a photographic reportage, a picture story? Sometimes there is one unique picture whose composition possesses such vigour and richness, and whose content so radiates outward from it, that this simple picture is a whole story in itself. But this rarely happens [... and] if it is possible to make pictures of the “core” as well as the struck-off sparks of the subject, this is a picture-story (Cartier-Bresson 1999: 23).

#### A THEORY OF MONTAGE

In the previous chapter, the photograph has been approached as a stand-alone signifying vector and in relation to the verbal medium. Practices of representation have incorporated multimedia ‘dialogues’ within what Foucault address as semantic hierarchies; at the same time, intended significations might rely on distinct practices such as those of the symbol and the simulacrum: I advocate the centrality of montage for the full development of such an articulated model of communication.

Sergei Eisenstein defines montage as “*the need for connected and sequential exposition of the theme, the material, the plot, the action*, the movement within the film sequence and within the film drama as a whole” (Eisenstein 1986: 13, emphasis in the original). He further clarifies the extent to which montage can be applied to all and every expressive form, from music to sculpture, and, as every editor is perfectly aware, to writing too: this is the reason why I consider my approach to montage for photography perfectly consistent with Eisenstein’s studies on cinema.

It follows that montage is everything, and, arguably, everything has to be mounted in order to be communicative. As an example, Orson Welles came to state that he would feel truly

creative only when mounting his movies, and how “montage is not *an* aspect of film, it is the main one” (Estrin 2010: 20, emphasis in the original, my translation). However, not all practices of montage are comparable or intend the same policy of signification: hence, I will further rely on the symbol and the simulacrum to epitomise intended policies of signification in montage.

For the present context, I will not focus on Eisenstein’s theories on reception and audiences, as I am not interested in his, still fiercely debated, ideological stand on the arts. His extremely difficult relationship with Stalin and his devoted adoration of Walt Disney well epitomise a theoretical mind who would use Japanese *kabuki* as the ontological pivot for his research. Concurrently, his intellectual and professional trajectories have favoured the constant over-simplification and misuse, often for political aims, of his work: this is the reason why I will ground my research solely in his practice-led theoretical assessment of montage to progress the unfolding of my Meta-Image paradigm.

Eisenstein identifies the basics of image signification as when “two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition” (Eisenstein 1986: 14). In such a context, the adverb ‘inevitably’ will be explored as the epitomization of the difference between ‘generation’ and ‘creation.’ In Eisenstein’s words, creative montage is that which gives three out of the product of one and one: this clearly refers to film, but, as I have already argued, it is consistently applied within photographic processes and mixed media (see *The Simulacrum of the Blind*).

Narrative practices require a connected and sequential exposition either in the form of the ‘fabula’ or the ‘plot’ (Tomasevskji 2003), as without them there would be only unrelated and illogically arranged fragments. As “our films are faced with the task of presenting not only a narrative that is *logically connected*, but one that contains a *maximum of emotion*



*and stimulating power*” (Eisenstein 1986: 14, emphasis in the original), each storyteller is in a position to dictate the rhythm and the path of her work, and does so through a wide array of narrative strategies (see Eco 1984a). For the present context, the plot will be approached as either arranged by generation or creation; the former supports a direct connection between the representing frame and the representation itself (like the simulacrum), whereas the latter suggests a new dynamic breaking linear germinations (like the symbol).

Eisenstein’s work oscillates between an orthodox adherence to Marxist dialectics and the creative and sensorial quality of the human: as much as the Marxist notion of dialectics can be identified as the main source for his approach to montage, Otto Rank’s work (Rank 2010) widens his outlook. In fact, through Rank’s psychoanalytic research, Eisenstein argues that the primary sensorial materials of a movie (light, darkness and sound) can “reach the deepest layers of emotional memory” (Tsivian 2000: 00:06:32 – 00:06:39). As a consequence, visual communication does not merely inform, show, present or demonstrate, as it has to give meaning, to designate, and, ultimately, signify (see my argument on the flashbulb memories).

As much as Marxism is expected to generate a specific outcome, the sensorial quality of communication ‘destabilises’ it. Eisenstein’s main line of research can be precisely identified in such an unresolved ambiguity, as he would encompass both dynamics without preferring any: arguably so, his derived theory of communication aims to harmonise Marxism with psychoanalysis, and prefer the symbol to the simulacrum.

### ***Eisenstein’s Symbols VS. Vertov’s Simulacra***

In such a context, a parallel with his contemporary Dziga Vertov and his approach to documentary and montage might be particularly revealing. The emerging format of the

1920s' Soviet newsreels offer Vertov a new tool to inform on and give meaning to the Soviet Revolution. For instance, in his first *Cine-Pravda* (June 1922), Vertov edits un-sequential images of un-connected events to construct an ideological statement. The sequence is:

Save the Starving Children  
[Shots of emaciated children]  
The removal of Church valuables  
[Shots of icons being destroyed]  
Every pearl saves a child  
[Shots of children being fed] (Hicks 2007: 7).

For Vertov the assertive power of the visual is arranged around the usage of recorded fragments of *pravda* (truth) to argue a claim of causalities. In this specific case, montage is what allows two (real) scenes to *generate* a third one: however, contrary to Eisenstein, the third shot is the logical and unavoidable result of the combination of the previous two. As a confident promulgator of the linear relation between the Real and its representation, Vertov brings his audiences to see such a direct and clear argument: to him, one and one gives two because of the asserting power of Marxist dialectics as applied to the visual.

However, as noted, Eisenstein is so confident in the over-shaping power of the image that he does not need to illustrate what audiences will be *inevitably drawn to* with his imageries. To Eisenstein, one and one suggests, evokes, and *creates* three, as the third part is what audiences bring in through their sensorial engagement. Because of the over-encompassing complexities and the profound depth of imageries, this third element might even be a thoroughly unexpected signification to Eisenstein: having already introduced my phenomenological framework to overcome the distinction between subject and object allows me to arguably incorporate issues of audience without shifting into informative paradigms.

Within the terms of the juxtaposition just arranged, Vertov and Eisenstein echo a policy of signification respectively of the simulacrum and the symbol. This is explicitly recognised by Eisenstein's reiterated reference to montage as "conflict" as opposed to the linearity of Vertov's argument: by simultaneously working on a multitude of different visual layers, Eisenstein creates works of extraordinary complexity.

Too much imagery stuffed in? But it is too much only for those who do not *read* images but merely rush after action. Too much for those who go to the movies for telegraphic syntax, rather than for poetic writing with repetitions, illustrations and music – for those who look for the anecdote alone (Tsivian 2000: 00:33:00).

Eisenstein's capital concept of internal contradiction further supports a dynamic approach to montage for which aesthetics assumes a pivotal communicative role: for both authors form is content, but for Vertov form is what allows him to prove and show his simulacrum whereas for Eisenstein is the multifaceted layering of multiple images. Eisenstein summarises the above through his notion of 'montage-image,' and uses it to acknowledge the extent to which audiences might *create* a third meaning (Barthes 1977: 52-68). By using aesthetics as his semantics, Eisenstein establishes the montage-image as the core of his articulated and very personal policy of signification. He does so by shaping his informative materials with extremely sophisticated imageries (see below Figure 1): these frames signify both by reference to concurrent images within the film (Figure 2), or to comprehensive socio-cultural imageries outside it (Figure 3 and Figure 4).



Figure 1. Frame from Ivan The Terrible © Tsivian 2000.

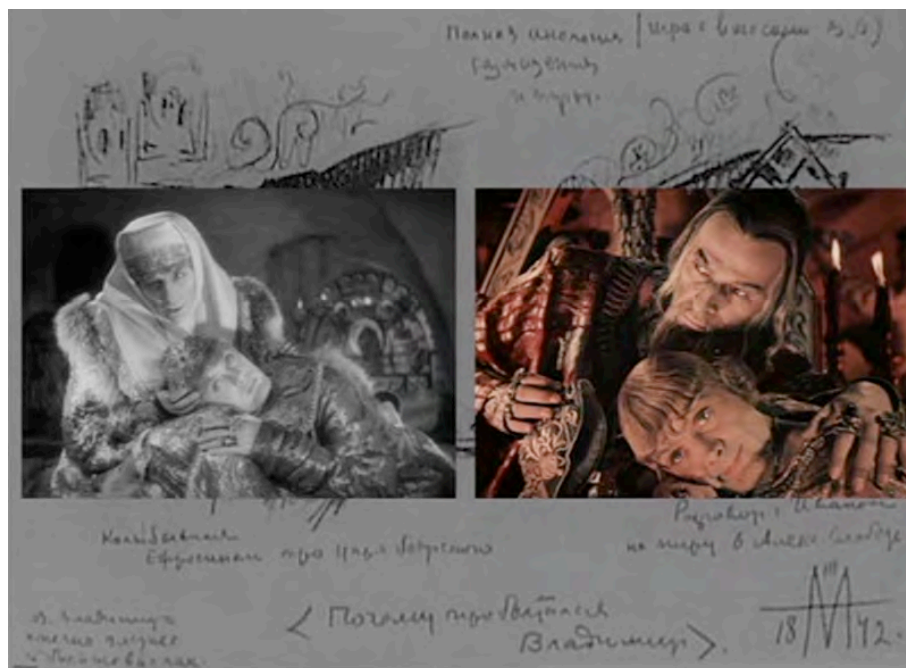


Figure 2. Frame from Ivan The Terrible © Tsivian 2000.



*Figure 3. Frame from Ivan The Terrible © Tsivian 2000.*



*Figure 4. Work by Hiroshiga still hanging in Eisenstein's bedroom © Tsivian 2000.*

By using aesthetics to expand his space of signification, Eisenstein leads audiences to experience the terms of a truly sensorial outburst. Eco argues how “every text, however ‘open’ it is, is constituted, not as the place of all possibilities, but rather as a field of *oriented* possibilities” (Eco 1990: 142, emphasis added). To Eisenstein, the signification of the representation is neither predictable nor containable within the strict boundaries of the frame as it falls outside any generative process: indeed, it is created by the sensorial relation between the film and the audience. Through his montage-image Eisenstein transforms the single frame into multiple concurrent imageries which audiences creatively engage and signify.

In such a context, Eisenstein evokes the concept of the hieroglyph to epitomise his comprehensive theory of signification. In a manner similar to that of the hieroglyph, montage signifies images differently upon their relative placement within the sequence, and upon the “copulation” they generate with those adjacent. Hence, the combination

of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is to be regarded not as their sum, but as their *product, i.e., as a value of another dimension, another degree* [...] For example: the picture for water and the picture of an eye signifies “to weep”; the picture of an ear nearing the drawing of a dog = “to listen”; a dog + a mouth = “to bark”; a mouth + a child = “to scream”; a mouth + a bird = “to sing”; a knife + a heart = “sorrow,” and so on. But this is montage! (Eisenstein 1977: 29-30, emphasis added).

As montage applies to “the theme, the material, the plot, the action, the movement within the film sequence and within the film drama as a whole,” it is *ontologically* creative: by signifying the single frame, the montage-image, and the whole construction, the photo essay, Eisenstein clarifies the extent to which the juxtaposition of two images “resembles a creation – rather than the sum of its parts [i.e. a generation as] *the result is qualitatively*

distinguishable from each component element viewed separately (Eisenstein 1986: 17, emphasis in the original).

### ***Montage's Significations – A Case Study***

I will now contextualise Eisenstein's theoretical framework by reference to a very simple sequence (here below) and its intended and received significations.



*The Bektashi – A montage © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia, 2008.*

Audiences have signified these three photographs in a variety of ways. Among many, they have hinted to a temporal progression, as from left to right images might indicate the passage of the day from dawn to dusk. Alternatively, they have been read spatially, as they present activities within the *tekke* (a praying room), in Mikhail's own room, and outside. They have depicted three different activities, praying, reading and walking, and finally they have been shot through three different angles, with a medium shot, a wide angle and a wider shot: these are just four possible paths of signification which I would not be able to orient in any way as they all co-exist contemporary within the same montage, and *because of* it. What happens when I substitute the first image with another one depicting the same activity but with a different composition?



*The Bektashi – A second montage © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia, 2008.*

How do I signify the Real once the signification of the representation produces many alternative but contiguous significations out of a slightly different representation?



*The Bektashi – A third montage © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia, 2008.*

Quite interestingly, none of the above significations was my intended one. I actually constructed this short sequence merely by dynamically linking the round Punctum on the top of the hat: that Punctum turned into a Revealing Index for me only, as none of my interviewed audiences identified my pattern and appreciated its semantic quality.



*The Bektashi – My Revealing Index © Massimiliano Fusari/Massimedia, 2008.*



As these processes inform the overall visual narrative development, Eisenstein finalises his theoretical framework with the tools montage uses to signify, namely the Revealing Index and the Overtone. In one of his crucial arguments, he introduces a series of four images: a grey old man, a grey old woman, a white horse, and a snow-covered roof. After these four images, audiences might be wondering what would follow, as there are no available elements to foresee any development either towards the element 'old age' or that of 'whiteness' (Eisenstein 1977: 65). As a consequence, Eisenstein approaches the Revealing Index as that which signifies a series of images and punctuates the narrative of its explicit connections: hence, not only the Revealing Index works on the single image but to signify the whole series too (as for my signification of the Bektashi). Furthermore, this tool works for all media and platforms, and might be applied either as a clarifying tool or, at a later stage of the sequence, as a further contributor to the narrative sensorial 'thickness.'

In the case study above, a title like 'Entering the Russian Winter' might effectively work to suggest the story development towards whiteness from the very beginning. Conversely, a delayed Revealing Index might elicit a stronger audience's participation through a *crescendo* of sensorial engagement: hence, Eisenstein's idea of the Overtone. By explicitly recognising the extent to which a prolonged sensorial engagement might echo, and then resonate, in the visual semantic space, signification becomes not the sum but the synchronic *product* of music, image, colour, rhythm and any other available communicative element (Eisenstein 2010: 402).

### ***Constructing The Photo Essay - Length***

The length of the photo essay remains possibly one of the most troubling issues in photographic practice, and contributes so much to the shifting dimension of the ontology of

the photograph: in fact, as much as the photograph is a medium of communication, so is it the photo essay format.

However, a photo essay is constituted of a *certain* number of ordered images but its length (5? 12? 731?) has no widely acknowledged standards. A movie, either a fiction or a documentary (let's assume these categories in an un-problematized manner) lasts around an hour for a documentary, and around an hour and a half for a fiction: these are recognised standards whose growing exceptions have recently boomed due to the presence of new online distribution formats and channels.

Photography relies upon a thoroughly distinct paradigm as photographs are used as a stand-alone communicative vectors and as part of mixed and multimedia formats within an extremely diversified array of dissemination dynamics: print (and online) media might use the photograph as an illustration to a verbal document as much as independent stories for which the verbal is arranged as a supporting caption. Contrary to the way sound is fully integrated within moving images formats as an embedded medium, the photograph signifies as both a stand-alone and sequenced medium.

Arguably, in the absence of shared academic regulations on practice-led PhD research in photography, I could easily have arranged longer editings for my reportages. The history of visual ethnography and visual communication production is inscribed by rather contrasting examples: because of that, I will briefly refer to the three most relevant cases to benchmark my finalised policy of representation.

The first work recognised as visual ethnography was produced by Bateson and Mead in 1942, and presents a total of 759 photographs, a number that today would be impossible to reproduce for any photographic format (Bateson and Mead 1942). A much shorter visual essay of 64 pictures came out of the collaboration between the fashion

photographer Paul Hyman and Clifford Geertz in 1979 (Geertz, Geertz et al. 1979). The third case I intend to refer to is Colliers' work, which, incidentally, is the only recognised (but rather out-dated) manual on photography as a method for ethnographic research (Collier 1967).

These three works epitomise the first experiment in visual anthropology, a case study from *the anthropologist*, and the only manual on fieldwork photography. Aesthetically, the three works share their preference for black and white photography over colour: this could be easily explained in terms of preferred language, easiness of material development or, simply, because of printing costs. Paul Hyman is also the only professional photographer as in the other two cases anthropologists took the photographs themselves. It is also relevant to point out that Hyman is a fashion photographer rather than a photojournalist, and this might lead to question Geertz's overall policy of visual representation: among many considerations, could we imply that for Geertz photographic styles are truly irrelevant when applied to anthropology?

Geertz's 1979 work is also crucial as it dates the radical shift visual communication witnessed in the early 1980s: on one hand, photography was becoming a popular medium and, on the other, ethnographers were starting to use the video camera as their favourite, if not sole, visual tool (Barbash and Taylor 2007). The issue of whether these two events might be mutually connected would deserve the kind of developed analysis that is outside the scope of my work. For the present context, I only wish to stress how by the 1980s photography's usage in the human sciences steadily declined in favour of the moving camera, which established itself as the most widely used tool in academia. Academic regulations have fully reflected such a trend and, apart from a few concerned institutions, have offered little guidance for practice-led PhD research in photography. In the end, I found myself completely free to define my own terms.

In such a context, I used the University of Exeter regulations for practice-led video research (Ryan 2010), and equated video requirements with photographic ones to arrange a total of three photographic essays: the Syrian one provides the questioning ground to elaborate my visual grammar, while the Bahraini and the combined essay offer two examples of intended significations assessing practices in montage finalised for distinct media forms. I remain aware that my decision might be fully questionable as it raises ontological issues on what video and photography are alongside the extent to which the latter might be compared to the former in mixed and multimedia formats (see Geraci 2012).

Once paralleled the requirements of photography with video, I used photojournalism to define essay lengths and limit my storytelling narratives to twenty images each. The process of selection was challenging, difficult and extremely painful: Annex 04 provides a visual example of the complexity and laboriousness of the process by showing a series of screen shots for the very last steps for the editing process. In such regard, my analysis of the extent to which the internal shift of a single picture might considerably alter semantic significations reinforces my rationale for my Meta-Image paradigm, and argues for multimedia interactive digital formats.

In the previous sections I have identified the main theoretical issues and the tools I would rely on for the overall signification of my photo essay. I will now work backwards using both the Bahraini and combined essay to explore, assess and track how I intended my practices of signification. In this way I aim to motivate the extent to which my montages might be better understood as creations rather than generations: within such a framework, I will juxtapose the Bahraini work with the combined essay as two finalised significations for a publication and for my exhibition *Behind A Camera – In Front A Hawza*.

## THE BAHRAIN CASE STUDY

As mentioned above, the Bahraini archive includes a total of 1,360 photographs produced out of a fieldwork project of less than two weeks. This section will explore the reportage and briefly address a few cases as particularly exemplificative of my stand on montage: the result is the identification of *one among many* possible editings for one of my many possible policies of intended signification.

The following photo essay is here assessed as one *hic et nunc* arrangement of an intended and finalised policy of representation; I have produced concurrent and alternative editings from the same archive for other formats and platforms, and *because of* different personal moods. By acknowledging the temporariness of my finalised selection, I do not imply its limited value but recognise the extent to which a different context might have led to a diverse arrangement and signification: once more the problematic incapability of the photographer to 'inform' is rearranged around the communicative power of the image.

I first tagged and imported all my photographs into a content management and archival program such as Adobe Lightroom to rate them; among my preferred ones, I searched for the opening shot. This is just one way to begin: I might have preferred a different tactic for an alternative strategy, either by focusing on the concluding image or choosing a central pivot around which to unfold the rest of the narrative through alternative Revealing Indexes and Overtones. I could have also grouped photographs into semantic sections and used them to develop a progressive thread line: this is usually the case for 'A day in a life' format in which the succession of activities punctuates and motivates the story (see The Bektashi case study, Fusari 2009b). I could have equally arranged a few main themes and used them as visual milestones for the editing: in the end, there are as many available possibilities as ways of doing it. Just as an example, one of my most successful editings

was completed at 3 AM asking a friend to give me a sequence of number which I used to order my twenty-three photographs: the result was shockingly good, and I felt this could raise an issue of semantic synchronicity (Jung in Wilhelm 2003: 15-35) as for what photographs want, how they signify and where their 'message' is.

My final choice brought me to prefer a creative strategy to a generative one, as I intended to keep my audiences as puzzled as I could to exploit their curiosity and prolong the overall sensorial engagement. In such a way, I thought I could lead them to participate in the subject 'Hawza' and *feel* rather than just *look at* my work: I opted for a 'loud' beginning and finalised my montage to preserve its Overtone as long as I could to promote a more convincingly and less traumatic experience of a very traditional Muslim setting.

I have already addressed how I defined the length of my photoreportages. Alongside the identified limit of twenty units, my foremost concern focused on the chosen platform: as the same medium might either promote or limit semantic features, I have constantly re-edited my sequence to match the specific requirements of the chosen communicative platform. As an example, on my website I dictate both the duration and the transition form for each picture as I choose, among many alternatives, a cut, fade or dissolve style of transition, and I might choose to allow audiences to ponder photographs for 3 or 12 seconds: these tactical choices greatly shape my intended policy of engagement as much as previous decisions on colour / black and white or any intended Revealing Index. In a similar way, I might introduce the whole photographic reportage with a long text or accompany each image with a caption and set how captions will be engaged: arguably to produce a caption on top of each photograph intends and stimulates different engagements from those of, say, making captions optional. Finally, audiences might be engaged with an automatic self-timed sequence or required to advance the narrative

themselves: all these variables fully impact the sensorial engagement of the storytelling, and 'make it' as much as, if not more than, the visual content inside the frame.

### ***Editing Bahrain***

As I have explored above, the photographer's intended policy of signification is the only addressable segment in any communicative dynamic. I do not intend to explore the extent to which my intended communication has been received by reference to informative patterns (i.e.: its quantitative analysis) because this is both ambiguous and problematic at best: I will here solely contextualise how I drafted my photo essay within the gulf created by the contemporary signification of the stand-alone photograph and of the *whole* essay.



*Image 001 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

The first photograph depicts Sheikh Habib in a class. The whiteboard behind him is intended to provide two specific pieces of information: firstly, it should evoke a classroom

environment, and, upon it, establish the teaching institution within an Arab-Muslim context, both because of the writing and the Sheikh's appearance.

The image presents a variety of Puncta, and because of that I have used it for my introduction: his right hand, the two rings, the white turban, the different planes of representation developing from the hand to the face, the body and the whiteboard are some of its multiple and concurrent Revealing Indexes to be.

One example should suffice to address the extent to which Puncta might signify in an unexpected and un-foreseeable manner: during a revision session, I learned from my supervisor that the whiteboard would, for him, be a truly Revealing Index of the modernity of the Hawza. I would not have identified such a communicative component as I constantly come across whiteboards since I left secondary school. Equally, he might not have engaged that Punctum had he not just come back from teaching a semester full of blackboards in Chicago where, incidentally, they might be perceived in a fully distinct manner: the phenomenological dimension and highly personalization of the signification process has constantly suggested me to focus solely on my intended signification rather than running after possible semantic differentials (Eco 1990).

However, when I signified the Real I did not consciously focus on the diagonal linking the highly colour saturated date on the top left with the character: this pattern might have been in my own 'visual archive,' and I might have used it as an unconscious Punctum. Because my intended communication is the product of the signification of the Real with that of the representation, its precise reception remains debatable if not thoroughly un-assessable. I signified the representation through the white space framing the image to call audiences into my photo essay and encounter the voices of the dialogue I am visually setting up between a teacher and a student.





*Image 002 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

After having entered into the whiteboard, audiences would leave Sheikh Habib to meet Ali, the young student hunched over books, whose posture works as a strong evocation of the time we all have spent at school. His white tunic should reinforce a visual continuity with the previous image and suggests the feeling of a shared environment. As stated above, my theoretical framework does not aim to *generate* a linkage between Sheikh Habib and Ali as teacher and student. Instead, I am interested in a narrative which is informed by photographic verisimilitude as semantics for which audiences *might* interpret Ali as a first temporary Revealing Index to the overall visual narrative.



*Image 003 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

The third shot aims to corroborate how the social context is a learning space with the top-down shot from behind the shoulder of a teacher: his gesture is rather imposing, and should explicitly evoke social roles and dynamics. However, how do we know he is a teacher? The narrative introduces a different setting and different characters: I do not plan the story to develop logically through a linear argument in the form of a dialogue between Sheikh Habib and Ali, as I aim to *create* instead of *generating*, *evoking* rather than *describe*. Concurrently, the continuous change of scenario should promote the conflictual stance Eisenstein acknowledges as central to creative montage. The scholarly dimension of the Hawza seminaries should be identified even in the absence of any verbal support upon the micro-stories I introduce in each frame and by their “spliced” significations.

I have arranged the first three pictures as a short introduction to the Hawza as a school and a place of knowledge production and exchange. Aesthetics informs the three frames differently, in terms of colours, tones and recording perspectives, with whiteness working

as an explicit thread line. The following image of Hassan dictates a stop in the progress of the photographic narrative through the depiction of a frontal portrait cutting the frame in two, if not, possibly, into four.



*Image 004 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

Hassan is checking a few definitions following a discussion with a fellow colleague. The frame is cut vertically in two, or, possibly, into four by the visible horizontal edge of the table: as the arrangement is not perfectly perpendicular, it shapes the photograph within a classical frontal perspective without being too static. *Image 004* is here intended to wrap up the first section of the photographic essay as it reconnects to the first image both aesthetically and semantically: the white background, its portrait form and the empty frame implicitly link the teacher to the student, and restate the scholarly dimension of the Hawza.



*Image 005 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

The white thread line is then dismissed in favour of the warm tone of *Image 005*, which is then confirmed and fully developed in *Image 006*. In more detail, *Image 005* is framed upon the diagonal linking the top right corner with the bottom left, as further reinforced by its focus, from blurred to sharp: its aesthetic is here planned to evoke the dialogue started in the previous section through reference to the blurred student on the right and the sitting figure on the left. At the same time, it should 'inform' that, besides class activities, there are also occasions for one-to-one discussions and learning. In choosing this image as a follow up to Hassan's, I planned to visually twist the perpendicularity of the previous image, and semantically, as well as aesthetically, suggest a new dimension to the unfolding of the narrative. Hence, *005* works as a connecting pivot between the first section (images from *001* to *004*) and those following.

Aesthetics is here exploited to its full semantic potential. Despite the limited informative space provided to clearly recognise social roles (i.e. how do we know they are a student

and a professor? Where are they? What are they doing? Is Ali there? And, most importantly for the Hawza dynamics, what makes a student?), the white tunic suggests a state of apprenticeship. At the same time, the book he holds punctuates a possible interpretation for the figure on the right by evoking, both semantically and aesthetically, its juxtaposition with a teacher (left). The visual dichotomy between the brown and the white tunics is arranged around the *tasbeih* (the Muslim rosary beads) as a semantic Punctum for the signification of a Muslim environment, and the ring (top of the frame) as an evocative element. Again, this example might be particularly revealing of the two-fold dimension of the 'photograph' as the product of the signification of the Real with its representation: as much as I shot the photograph to juxtapose and mutually signify the two characters upon each other, so by placing it after *Image 004* and before *Image 006* makes it communicate something else and something more from what I saw initially.

The following two images use the couch (clearly two different couches) as a pivot to progress on the representation of some of the off-class dynamics at the Hawza Al-Qaim: alongside the teaching, mainly arranged in small circles and in a rather informal way when compared to a 'Western' environment (*Image 006*), there are also moments of free time in which students SMS family and friends (*Image 007*).





*Image 006 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

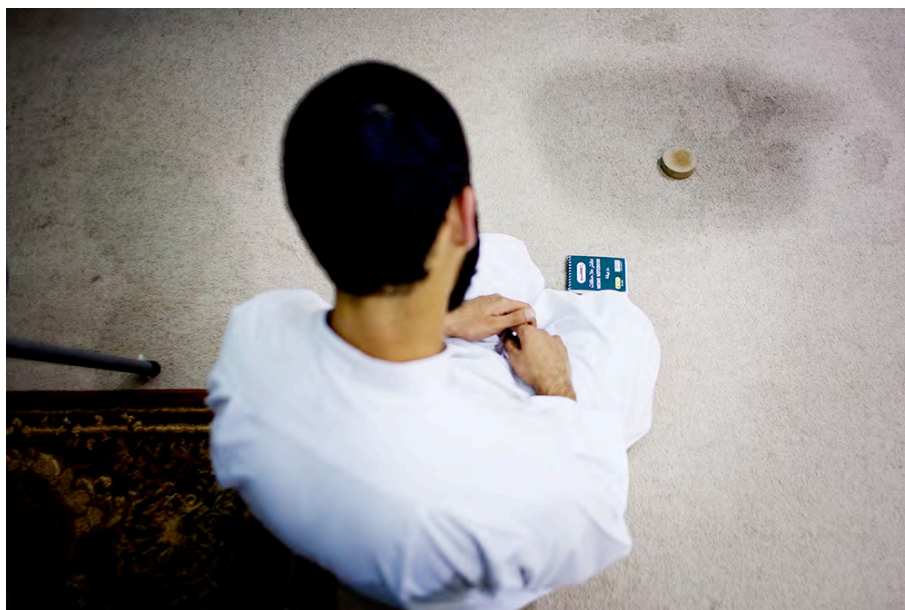


*Image 007 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

*Image 006* metaphorically concludes the second chapter of the story dealing with the scholarly activities of the Hawza: by using the couch as a pivot, it aesthetically connects to *Image 007*, and introduces the third chapter of the story. Overall, *Image 007* is one of my favourite shots in visual terms, as the richness of the fake brocade fills it completely, and juxtaposes a strong horizontal line with the vertical stiffness of the very concentrated Sayyed: having appreciated his company, I admit that it would have been almost impossible to find a more revealing portrait of his.

*Image 008* continues signifying the off-class activities while introducing a new aesthetic perspective.



*Image 008 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

The portrait is shot top-down, and was facilitated by Hassan's performance of his daily duties as a believer. Together with the previous two images, *Image 008* contributes to twist the rigid and classical framings of horizontal and vertical lines of the first section;

even though it is visually more essential and simpler than those immediately preceding, *Image 008* still conveys the aesthetics based on the golden rule of the third with Hassan on one side, and the *muhr-e Karbala* on the other. The image moves towards greyish tones and punctuates a pause between two more intimate and introspective sections.

The role of *Image 009*, *Image 010* and *Image 011* is thus to visually conclude the first half of the story and introduce a parallel side-story. By presenting a full portrait which, incidentally, is also one of the only two vertical compositions, *Image 012* initiates a new visual and semantic chapter.



*Image 009 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com*





Image 010 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano

Fusari/massimedia.com.



Image 011 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano

Fusari/massimedia.com.

My fieldwork in Bahrain was scheduled to last just less than two weeks. I had initially planned to devote the first week to articulate the socio-political space of the Hawza, and scheduled the remaining time to research personal stories beyond any scholar dimension. Ahmad (*Image 012*) is my only external thread line with his kindness to act as a ‘fixer’ for the second week’s storylines.



*Image 012 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

Until then, Ahmad had been a rather reserved student, behaving both discreetly and inconspicuously. When he realised my strong disappointment at not being able to complete my research, he agreed to take me to the university in which he was studying modern literature (*Image 013*), and have a coffee at the university bar (*Image 014*).



*Image 013 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*



*Image 014 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

Ahmad risked quite a lot by introducing me to the other university he was attending. The kindness he showed me equalled his understanding of my aesthetic requirements as he ‘performed’ for me along the very thin line separating posing from acting. In such a context, *Image 014* explicitly summarises all the concerns I have previously addressed regarding the relation between ‘Real’ and ‘fiction;’ I intend to use this as a final case study to argue the overcoming of narrower notions of the Real.

As in the case of the couches or that of the semantic shift from one classroom to another, my narrative has explicitly rejected a linear consequentiality: by choosing verisimilitude over realism, I have consistently posited my research within a distinct frame of references, that of photoreportage. As mentioned above, photoreportage is appreciated for promoting a more nuanced version of ‘the Real,’ accepting aesthetics as its prime semantic vector while reducing the role of its verbal component. Arguably, its mission to continuously interrogate the Real by exploring “the ‘core’ as well as the struck-off sparks of the subject”



(Cartier-Bresson above) in a creative and open manner questions teleologies of both anthropology and photojournalism. In such a context, it could be argued that the essence of photoreportage is not the consistent depiction of an issue in the form of a simulacrum but a questioning activity: in such a manner, it implicitly parallels the previous juxtaposition between documentary as a style and as a document.

Following this thread of analysis, anthropology can capitalise on the expanding and truly redefining semantic possibilities of the digital not to be approached as a supporting tool but as a thoroughly new form: this should be regarded unequivocally as the most stimulating opportunity provided by today's communicative outlooks. My Meta-Image paradigm might be finally introduced to offer a visible and effective example of the new features currently available and continuously expanding for academic research. The case of Sheikh Muhammad will exemplify my perspective.



*Image 015 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

Sheikh Muhammad was the person in charge for my transportation as, by coincidence, we were living very close to each other. *Image 015* is a portrait of him driving towards the Hawza in the morning, while *Image 016* is one of the four shots I was allowed to capture at his apartment. In an almost identical manner to previous experiences, I was given very little time to shoot his portrait, possibly because of both a general sense of discomfort and a misconception about portraits sessions.

Even though portraits might seem to be an easy task, they require a conspicuous amount of attention and thought, particularly if they need to negotiate distinct cultural worlds for multi-audience policies of representation and signification: as a result, portraits might require the subject's willingness to fully engage with the surrounding background as much as with the photographer.

As Paton details, these possibilities are unfortunately very seldom present (Paton 2008): despite all the research a photographer might carry out on her subject, a contextualised portrait might be the result of a mere stroke of luck rather than a properly studied work. For instance, Cartier-Bresson recalls how he had very carefully researched Marie Curie's profile before meeting for a portrait session. However, once she opened the door and welcomed him with her husband, he immediately photographed them together as that image presented an impressive multitude of Puncta and Revealing Indexes: his always researched decisive moment was just there for him.



*Marie Curie © Henri Cartier-Bresson. Source: <http://ysvoice.tumblr.com>.*

He stayed with them all the time they had planned to, pretending to shoot some more portraits out of courtesy, and with the certainty of having already decided (Montier 2008: 123). In the specific case of *016*, the portrait was arranged in a few minutes, and without any interest or willingness to engage with me.



*Image 016 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

*Image 016* might be used as a first case study for my Meta-Image paradigm. The portrait depicts the Sheikh in his sitting room surrounded by a wide array of hang portraits: who are they? Why are they there? Why did he prefer them to any other? The inherent informative potentials for such a multi-layered portrait is immense, but un-exploited. Also, Sheikh Muhammad was very keen on talking rather than being photographed.

The possibility to develop a multimedia representation by fully exploring different sub-narratives was there for my Meta-Image: in such a context, pop-up boxes on top of the digital file could have presented online biographical links of the hanging characters illustrating their theological or personal relevance alongside short interviews with Sheikh Muhammad; interviews could have further focused on Shi'a issues as much as the socio-political situation of Bahrain or depicted more personal and intimate concerns of the Sheikh.



All these elements would not over-imposed on the photograph aesthetics, but complemented its semantics: in fact, the necessity of activating rather than having them offered as verbal caption, articulates the distinct policy of engagement my Meta-Image paradigm promotes: by making the informative and the verbal features of the photograph optional, I aim to incorporate their possibilities for signification within a visually led paradigm. As I have previously identified through the cases studies of *Time Management* and of the BA audience response sessions, the verbal tend to hierarchize the visual in mixed communication, and the Meta-Image is my suggestion to arrange alternative semantic policies for a photoreportage-like communication. Upon these reasons, I advocate a capital rethinking of the informative and communicative possibilities of academic research through the expanding and thoroughly revolving possibilities of the digital revolution: the tools are available and extremely cheap, if not totally free, but they still lack proper academic recognition and communicative usage.

*Image 017* concludes my tour outside the Hawza by showing a glimpse of the Bahraini landscape. My preference for this shot is motivated solely upon aesthetic considerations, as I could have equally used other images. Once acknowledged the impossibility of photographing the space immediately outside the Hawza, there would be no rationale to choose an image to any other. As my project required a very low profile, I took my camera out from my (non-photographic) bag only in very few selected occasions to complement my fieldwork exploration with B-rolls: I did so to preserve the socio-political minority I was working with, which proved particularly important for a place on the verge of a civil war, as Bahrain was in the autumn of 2010.



*Image 017 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

*Image 017* therefore has no informative relevance for the Hawza itself, but complements the narratives by evoking and contextualising one of the many dichotomies of the country. By using Puncta to visually juxtapose poverty with development, I wish to suggest one of the contested dimensions of contemporary Bahrain: the Carrefour mall and the two skyscrapers surrounding the football goal in the middle of an empty frame filled with sand are two worlds I wanted to include within the same frame.

No caption should be required for Puncta set as explicit Revealing Indexes: as I wanted to contextualise the Hawza Al-Qaim within today's Bahrain, I did so upon aesthetically led considerations to juxtapose the poor Shi'a minority to the rich Sunni majority. I could have also relied on any of the following photographs, but I felt none of them was aesthetically or semantically stronger than *Image 017*.



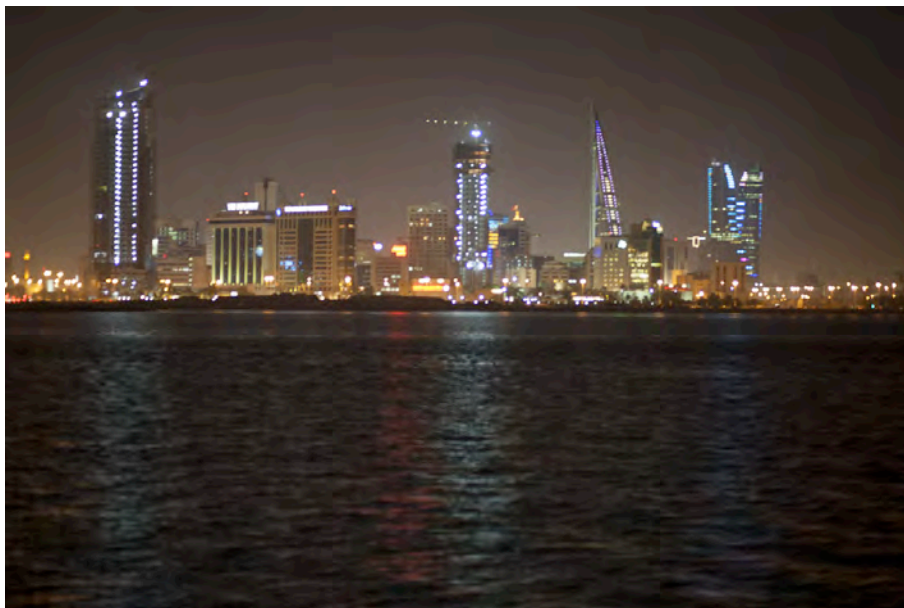
*Mafu\_20101021\_0157. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*



*Mafu\_20101023\_0023. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*



*Mafu\_20101023\_0015. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*



*Mafu\_20101021\_0162. Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

The remaining two images of the photographic essay serve a single purpose only, that of closing the story by recalling the main subject, the complex set of activities at the Hawza

Al-Qaim. *Image 018* aims to do so by incorporating within the same single space two activities, praying and reading while the final photograph is a portrait of Muhammad in a very intimate pose.



*Image 018 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*





*Image 019 from the Bahraini essay. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano*

*Fusari/massimedia.com.*

## **Conclusions**

To construct a photographic essay is an endeavour which is rarely definitive, fully achieved or totally convincing: the contemporary presence of many concurrent Puncta in a stand-alone photograph stimulates a multitude of possible Revealing Indexes which montage might either develop or aim to contain. Furthermore, even though some Puncta might go thoroughly un-recognised or un-detected, audiences could use them to dictate the development of *their* own photographic narratives.

Highmore recognises the extent to which “montage allows fragments and features to connect without having to supply a narrative of causality [while allowing] micro-descriptions” (Highmore in Binter 2010). I remain overall doubtful about his perspective as, to me, the issue is not to provide a narrative of causality as there is always at least one implicit: the issue, instead, is which kind of linkage or causality is pursued. In my work, I endlessly invite an appreciation of montage as creative and capable of exploring a multitude of paths and signifying practices. As much as montage explores and develops a subject so it can *aim to* manage the contemporary production of different, if not competing, parallel thread lines (like for the Bektashi example). Sometimes, these interpretative paths work along the personal fields audiences engage with little, if none, recognizable linkage to its original sign; if significations are strongly influenced by the *hic et nunc*, representations remain questionable as Puncta stimulate Revealing Indexes which are unpredicted, unexpected or, possibly, even fully unthought-of (like in the case of Marco’s press conference).

I have come to identify the realm of aesthetics as my grounding semantics: its usage has been constantly underestimated within academia, as it has been considered fully pertinent to the arts, and ‘unscientific.’ I have also addressed the extent to which the consistent

preference accorded to the informative dimension of the visual has rendered its communicative power neither ineffectual nor irrelevant. In my perspective, the over-encompassing dimension of communication and the notion of aesthetics as semantics should be used to rethink visual narrative patterns: nowadays, the digital offers unparalleled new opportunities and tools to signify current disciplines, processes and dynamics, and to accordingly re-arrange cognitive practices and paradigms.

Glawogger states that a “meaning or a message is to be found in every camera angle or in the juxtaposition between the shots – but I wouldn’t want to give it away in one sentence” (Binter 2010: 10). In my theoretical perspective, he would not be able to do so either, as aesthetically informed semantics signifies differently within each phenomenological context: in fact, distinct significations of the representation originate not only out of a diverse social context but equally within the same person in different occasions. If, like I argue, images signify like hieroglyphs, communicative dynamics might be radically altered upon a single informative detail: the preservation of the same informative value does not imply the consistent transmission of its communication, as the progression  $a > b > c$  is aesthetically and, hence, semantically other from  $a > c > b$ .

In such a context, the increasingly multifaceted dimension of the human being is mirrored in today’s cultural settings by cognitive systems progressively more and more defined by their ‘trans’ and ‘inter’ dynamics. Not only is visual communication overall unpredictable, but, equally so, personal and social engagements of all agencies concerned, from the photographer to her audiences; eventually, the same notion of authorship might be in need of a radical and comprehensive rethinking because of both the expanding inter- and intra-dimensions of current identities and its remix quality.



Because of the above mentioned issues, significations for both the photograph and the photo essay might be approached as temporary by-products of phenomenological creative practices: in fact, not only each image might suggest a variety of Puncta but these elements might engage the same audience differently by becoming explicit Revealing Indexes at different times. In the same manner, montage promotes intended paths upon the linkage of certain Revealing Indexes: as these are continuously evolving so is the photo essay and its overall ('spliced') significations.

As a final example, I will use the following photograph shot in the garden of the hawza Al-Qaim of Damascus.



*mafu\_20100424\_0017. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

I signified the Real with the intended communication “students revising notes in the garden.” I signified the representation accordingly as a simulacrum to convey exactly the same notion. However, a few Italians I interviewed in separate audience response sessions actualised the Revealing Index ‘black students’ as one of the many latent Puncta:

the signification of the rest of the montage got diverted, actually *hijacked*, by that element, and I eventually preferred not to include the photograph for the final essay.

I found myself truly unprepared for such an engaged signification, as I had not actualised that Punctum before. I thought the subject could deserve a more articulated development as exploring the students' composition at the Hawza might have offered sociological insights on its social body. However, I felt unprepared to address the possible racial implications of the discussion, which, strangely enough, began to being raised only in August 2010. I had been showing the same montage for a couple of months without ever being mentioned that Revealing Index: what happened in August 2010 that contributed to draw attention to that? Was the Summer season over signifying my communication? Would I be able to manage possible spins of racial issues for my incoming exhibitions? How questionable could be including that representation of the Real when black students were a very small minority at the Hawza? They were there, I can attest it, but they were two of the three black students I saw across all the Hawzas I visited in Damascus. "Two out of three black students I saw:" were there many others? Were they the only ones? How could I know? Could I interview all the Hawza Directors and ask whether they had black students? Actually, when does a black person becomes 'black'? The limits of ethnographic representation got restated once more: how could I *aim* to contain the actualization of its semantic richness?

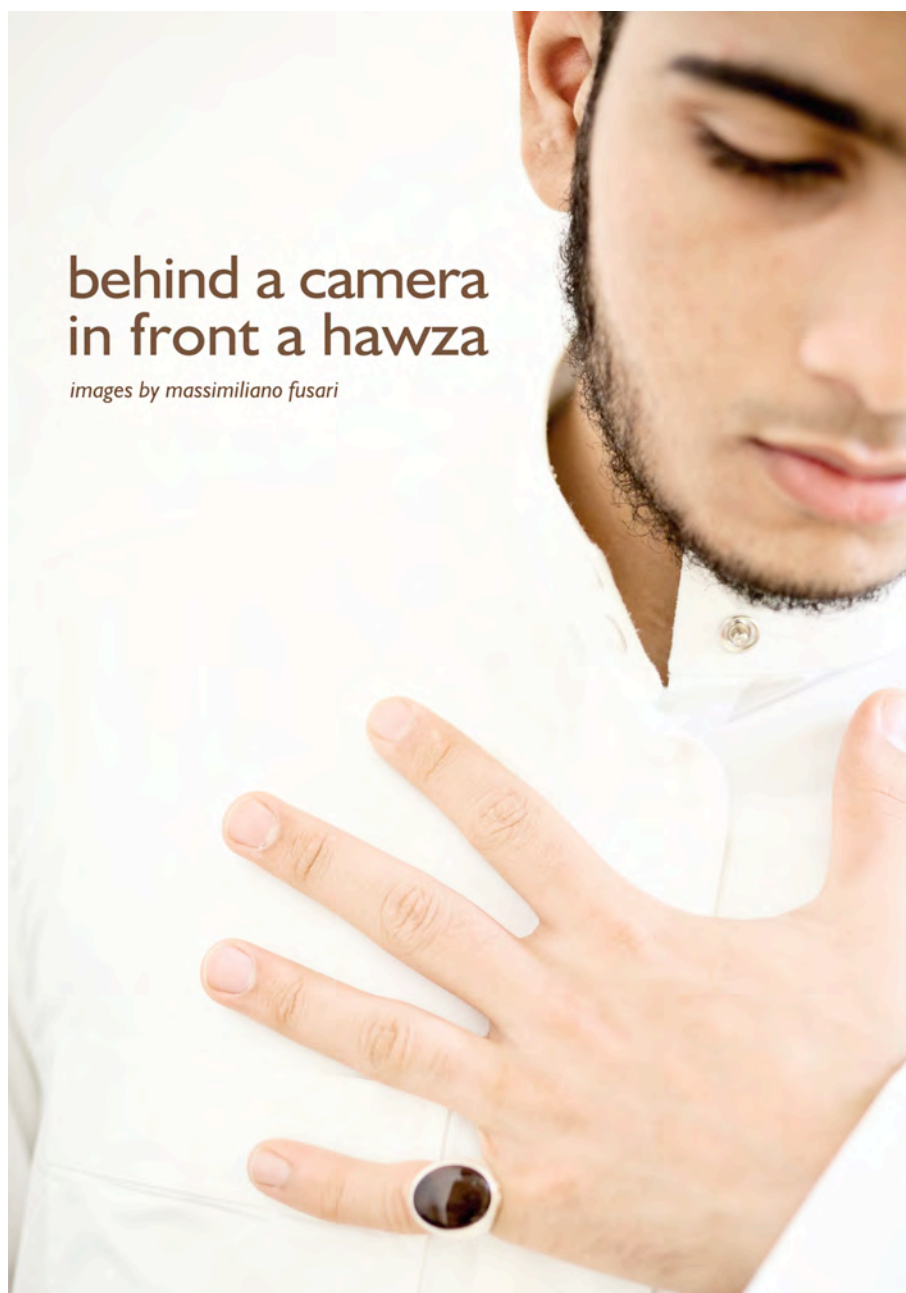
### **SIGNIFICATIONS AND SEMANTIC KNOTS**

As previously explored, I conducted two fieldworks, the first in Syria and the following one in Bahrain. I have been using the former to mostly explore the signification of the Real and the latter to argue the semantic quality of montage. As I will detail in the final chapter

with my Public Cultures 2.0 format, my focus is on the potentials for the photograph to acquire a public role in processes of multimedia communication.

I have edited a third photoreportage out of the combined arrangement of my two archives, and finalised it to signify for an exhibition. Alongside its aim to arrange a single comprehensive representation of the social life at the Hawzas, I thought it would offer a privileged case study to explore semantic continuities and communalities across two distinct social spaces. The challenge to confront the traumatic quality of today's Islam over a tri-dimensional engagement provided me with a further set of theoretical enquiries.

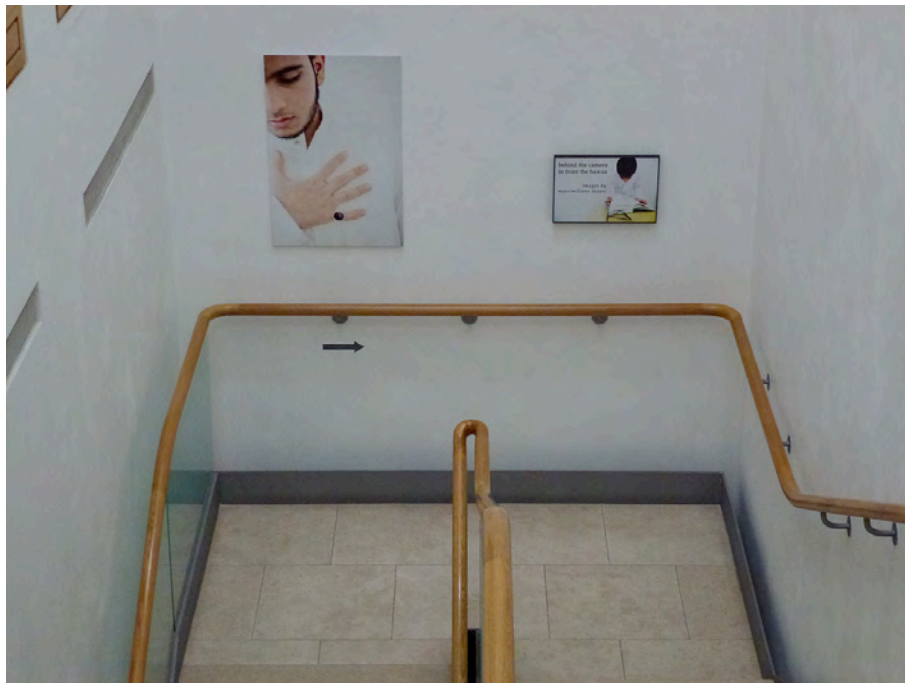
My exhibition *Behind the Camera – In Front a Hawza* first opened in February 2012 at the University of Exeter and has since travelled to the universities of Oxford and Durham and to the British Museum; in 2013 the same exhibition was in London both at the Royal Asiatic Society and the Brunei Gallery, where it was visited by around ten thousand people in fifty days.



*Invitation card to the exhibition Behind the Camera – In Front a Hawza.*

I have used the same 24 photographs for all exhibitions, but I arranged them differently to best occupy the tri-dimensional space provided, as space management is often the most crucial challenge confronting curators. I refer not only to the physical location itself but I include all concurrent factors, amongst which I pay particular attention to the available light, its direction, and the tricky management of multiple light sources. For example, a

regular wall with a large window might prove of no use for an exhibition requiring a more intimate setting which can be instead promoted in a more contrived space with a few faded lights. Similarly, another dimmer space with little light might be discarded because of opposite requirements. Hence, a curator might choose a space because of her planned policy of signification and this is possibly the case for larger settings with established authors. However, the opposite usually happens, and it is the exhibition montage which needs to adapt to the provided space: this is what I have regularly dealt with.



*Exhibition setting at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London 2013.*



*Exhibition setting at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London 2013.*



*Exhibition setting at the Al-Qasimi Building, Durham University, Durham, 2012.*

In the specific case of the British Museum (June 2012), the institution was not in charge of arranging my exhibition which was part of the larger event of the Royal Anthropological Institute bi-annual meeting. On my arrival, the confusion for the conference was total and, left to myself, I took the conference entry corridor to set my exhibition in an un-avoidable spot. However, after a few hours, another staircase leading to the conference rooms was opened, and I found my exhibition demoted from the main entry to one of two entry points. The exhibition would be right in the middle of a corridor, and photographs could be approached as from both right and left: the signification I had previously arranged for a left to right engagement would no longer be promoted by the panel's disposition. As I did not have time to re-edit my work, I used the only photograph in an A2 format, *01*, as a tactical pivot to indicate the exhibition's starting point upon its dimensions, vertical arrangement and colour aesthetics.





*Figure 01 – The A2 photograph as a pivot.*

In order to fully use the available space, all remaining A3 photographs were mounted very close to each other on a single large panel as I had previously done in Oxford. On both occasions the show was part of a larger social and cultural context, that of an academic



conference: Oxford organised the concluding conference for the British Academy Hawza project, while the British Museum hosted the Royal Anthropological Institute meeting.

The intended policies of engagement for both exhibitions were thus negotiated with the very consistent audiences attending the events, the spatial arrangement of the photographs and the constraints of the resulting cultural environment: the situation proved to be a very favourable opportunity to research public significations of my photographs. I had very limited time for my analysis in Oxford, but I was able to attend all three days of the conference at the British Museum, and I complemented my notes with a series of one-to-one interviews.

I will contextualise my findings by reference to the panel presented below (Figure 02), and signal how the remaining photographs, 016 to 024, were placed horizontally on the table joined to the vertical panel of Figure 01 (Figure 03).



*Figure 02 – Vertical panel with the first 15 images.*



*Figure 03 – The two panels.*

### ***The British Museum***

Over the three days my exhibition stayed at the British Museum, I interviewed nineteen people to research how they looked at and engaged with my photographs. Out of my findings, I identified how some people would move horizontally from left to right and then from the top row to the middle before finally reaching the bottom one: the sequence would be something like *01 > 02 > 03 > 04 > 05*, then *06 > 07*, and so on. Others would move vertically from left to right in a sequence like *01 > 06 > 11*, then *02 > 07 > 12*, and so on. Others more would start from the larger photograph (*01*), and link its white dominance to *02*; then they would move towards *07*, *14*, *10* and finally *04* and *03*, in some sort of anticlockwise reading following the photographs' tonal similarities. Photograph *08*, both because of its colour contrast and central position, captivated one person, who then looked at the other photographs around it in a very distracted manner. Another person started from *13*, as she likes blue very much, and looked at the other images with less attention.

The wide array of very diverse, if not fully distinct and *independent* policies of consumption I collected has recognised the extent to which significations are thoroughly engaged and phenomenologically re-signified within public spaces. I traced many unrelated paths of signification of the same exhibition as equally influenced by the participants' involvement in the conference and their own personal taste. The extent to which photographic interpretations might be the result of personal taste and moods was then juxtaposed to the exhibition spatial management: being at the centre of the corridor between the conference rooms produced two opposite dynamics: as much as it was impossible to avoid the exhibition itself, so the approaches would be very diverse because of its presence. Participants might walk-by alone or while chatting with someone they were trying to take out for dinner, a relevant contact, an old friend they had not seen for a while. Conversely, stopping to look at the photographs could be a means of getting rid of someone annoying as well as being the very conscious decision to look at the exhibition.

The interpretations I collected through my interviews bring out the extent to which every communicative hub differently signifies experiences within a wider semantic field: as previously signalled, some used the whiteness, others the colour blue, others more spatial patterns of engagement. Through the acknowledgment of these very specific *hic et nunc* conditions, my research on audiences' behaviour invited the appreciation of images as 'semantic knots.' Such a notion explicitly reconnects to the Punctum as "that accident which pricks me" (Barthes 2010: 27), and further develops my idea of the Revealing Index. "As a kind of subtle *beyond*" (Barthes 2010: 59, emphasis in the original), the Punctum is the detail which first takes audiences into the image, and then comprehensively signifies the whole image by its actualization as Revealing Index.

In a tri-dimensional setting, the Punctum might work as the semantic knot leading audiences across the development of their narratives like in the case of the hat in the

Bektashi series. In such a context, the crucial quality of the Punctum resides in its being latent and present (through the Revealing Index) at the very same time. As one of the participants at the exhibition at the British Museum pointed out to me, “the whiteness is what dragged me into the story, and signified it thoroughly” (British Museum 2012): the whiteness was surely present as a Punctum in *Image 01*, but it needed to be chosen and signified as the Revealing Index that would direct her gaze to *02* and then *07*.

As it happens for online galleries, the curator uses the space to invite specific practices of engagement: for instance, if I timed my slideshow for a three second succession, I would allow viewers to barely look at the images. Conversely, by timing the slideshow with a 15 second rotation, I promote more developed and relaxed, if not bored, engagements, and might risk to annoy audiences who would leave the website. These dynamics are common to all forms of visual communication: for instance, an action movie trailer might show sequences in a very hectic manner to make audiences not only see, but equally *feel* the movie’s thrilling component.

In the above theoretical context, the Revealing Index works as a semantic knot when it motivates two consecutive photographs and their “sliced” signification (Eisenstein 1977; Eisenstein 1987; Eisenstein 2010): by actualising a Punctum rather than another, it dictates and progresses the development of the whole narrative. Such a dynamic is common across different practices of representation but it acquires a crucial relevance for tri-dimensional engagements as it fills up and signifies the semantic void between two photographs.

Exhibitions tend to present a variety of different works to arrange a new perspective out of their montage, either by temporal, geographical or thematic composition. In a similar manner, the photo essay combining the Syrian and Bahraini archives raises a pivotal

concern of semantic unity: the diverse provenances of the photographs in terms of, among many issues, different social contexts (Syria and Bahrain), times (Spring and Autumn 2010), and spaces (the specific geographies of the different Hawzas) would require a thoroughly contextualised verbal support.

However, over the last few decades there has been a pronounced preference in exhibitions for patterns of visual representation with a limited role for the verbal. The increasing attention towards usage of aesthetics as semantics has been specifically informing photographic exhibitions for which a general introductory panel has been preferred to single captioning: since my first exhibition in 2005, I have consistently chosen to limit the role of the verbal even for highly debatable visual essays.

These images are an edited collection of my fieldworks on the Shi'ah seminaries of Syria and Bahrain. The issue of captioning and of what photograph depicts which of the two contexts is of little relevance for the present circumstances: the aim is to generate a new narration out of the two stories I extensively covered.

However, I cannot hide how by exhibiting these images, I do aim to offer my interpretative path, so absolutely personal as the gaze is definitively mine. By offering an unfinished path, I invite audiences to engage with my work, and by doing so, experience, explore, challenge and question not only the presented subject and myself, but themselves too.

What do you see, but much more importantly, what do you feel?

[massimiliano fusari]

*Introductory panel to the exhibition.*

### ***Signifying Exhibitions And Policies Of Political Engagements***

Alongside introductory panels and captions, exhibition spaces have been exploring usage of tablets and smartphone-like devices to promote enhanced patterns of signification within wider multimedia and social experiences. For instance, visitors of the Vatican Museums can hire a multimedia device which contextualises the Sistine Chapel with art historians' contributions, relevant works of Michelangelo and of his contemporaries and artistic heirs: all these supporting materials expand and contextualise the exhibition cultural space through the simultaneous solicitation of diverse sensorial channels. However, in spite of their innovative quality, these devices still offer a rather consequential argument as visitors decide the timing but not the sequence order of the provided materials.

Other cultural institutions have been offering downloadable iPad and Android applications to instead promote non-linear engagements to last beyond the exhibition itself. As part of a new policy of engagement, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has lifted all restrictions on taking photographs: the Museum has acknowledged the extent to which visitors' picture-taking activities improve their cultural engagement both at the exhibition and outside it, with the further production of an online legacy. By continuously posting on social media, primarily on Facebook, new practices of cultural production, signification and dissemination promote the exhibition, the Museum, and its educational mission: eventually, the highly debatable relation between verbal and visual media might be losing relevance within wider multimedia contexts and upon the shift from a two-dimensional medium, be it a magazine, a book, a journal or an online gallery, to a tri-dimensional space.

A very important photographic event for 2013 was Sebastiao Salgado's *Genesis*, which was hosted contemporary on several museums worldwide. I visited the exhibition at the London's Natural History Museum, and I will use it to finalise my notes on tri-dimensional processes of signification.

With reference to its verbal component the exhibition presents an introductory panel with the project rationale. Then, each photograph is precisely contextualised with background, research subject and, often, its implied signification too: the result is Salgado's strongly intended policy of signification for which the represented pipe is meant to be received exactly as the pipe he had in mind. Policies of engagement based on the photograph as a simulacrum have been widely used within educational contexts as well as for very sensitive socio-political issues. Arguably, a public event on the Holocaust is expected to have a strongly oriented policy of signification with a very specific and unquestioned message; the same perspective, I gathered, informed Salgado's exhibition. As he details in the several talks he has been giving to promote his 10-year-long project, Salgado's explicit aim is to bring audiences to recognise how dramatic the current change in climate is. As he explains, he has employed the poetic beauty of his imageries to inform on a scientific subject, and this is his most effective way to make an impact (Salgado 2013).

Even though I appreciate his rationale, I nevertheless feel deprived of the possibility to personally signify: overall, Salgado's simulacra rather annoyed me, and made me skip all captions, even those which could have helped me to understand his work. Salgado arranges a comprehensive communication for the intended dissemination of a single message: the earth is dying, and we all need to do our part. He renounces the openness of the symbol for his call to arms: his internationally celebrated professional profile is used to solicit a change and, to make it more effective, he does so through simulacra. His case should finally restate the extent to which my assessment of the simulacrum is not as

negative as that of Baudrillard, as in fact it addresses a value-free policy of communication. After having worked on social issues with a policy of open signification (Salgado 1990; Salgado 1998), Salgado has opted for a simulacrum-led communication in his latest project.

As for myself, my focus on the Muslim world derives and is fully sustained by the desire to affect international politics, and to stimulate more inclusive and trans-cultural patterns of communication. In spite of the necessity to arrange very informative communication, I have constantly preferred symbolic research outlooks. I remain aware of the extent to which my choice is as questionable as it is potentially dangerous, particularly following the socio-political trauma of 9/11. Because of that, I have constantly used my audience response sessions to explore the juxtaposition between intended policies of significations and their receptions to *aim to* contain the disruptive potentials of the image. However, the author's management of today's very complex, multifaceted and multimedia public environment remains extremely questionable and problematic. A final example will epitomise the case. I asked visitors to my exhibitions what message they would take home: by far the most shared answer refers to the sense of tranquillity and peace I portray in the Hawzas and this was largely confirmed by the comments in the exhibition guestbooks.

On one side I was re-assured of the extent to which my intended signification of the Real has been widely successful through my signification of the representation. In order to provide an alternative pathway to the traumatic dimension of current engagements with the Muslim world, I have tactically used both policies of signification of the symbol and of the simulacrum with the final aim to communicate to both academic and uninformed audiences. At the same time I have been questioning the extent to which my intended communication refers my own experience of the Hawzas, as my time in Syria was never



either tranquil or peaceful. Had I to recollect my experience in Damascus, I would define it as extremely difficult and mainly negative, and this contrasts sharply with my arranged signification of the representation: I met wonderful people, and I discovered and learnt about a socio-cultural setting I would not have been able to engage in any other way. However, the difficulties that constantly arose made my fieldwork impossible on a personal level, and brought me to subsequently question the relation between the Real and the representation as much as that of the photographer's Real in relation to her intended outcomes. More in detail, Islam, and 'urban Islam' specifically (Marranci 2008; Varisco 2005), is not a neutral subject to research as it carries explicit projections and implicit power relations. Negative comments or slightly critical annotations reverberate often to an un-manageable level as the case of the *Time Management* photograph has briefly contextualised: the possibility for negative remarks to fully inscribe and hijack any other informative capital to comprehensively re-signify the whole narrative is sequential to the 'traumatic' quality of today's Islam. As a result, the political component of public engagement of Islam is here approached as pivotal, and in need of the thorough management of its communicative platforms as detailed for my Public Cultures 2.0 format.

## CONCLUSIONS

Photographic representation of the Real, from photojournalism to visual anthropology, encompasses what I have identified as the contemporary signification of the Real and that of the representation: the former is centred on the photographer's aesthetic interpretation of the Real one engages *hic et nunc*; the latter identifies the way aesthetics and post-production might be creatively used to lead towards intended outcomes. My signification of the Real incorporates all pre-production and production activities whereas the signification of the representation uses aesthetics and montage as its semantics.

Because of the largely verbal dimension of contemporary societies, the relation between the visual and the verbal was suggested as pivotal. In spite of current tropes stating the relevance of the visual, I recognise the ill-informed and overall impoverished quality of today's imageries: visual abundance does not assure any developed or refined understanding as cultural forms might be widely popular without being personally engaged (Campbell 2013a). I have also fostered an overall interrogative stance for my photoreportage, relying on both simulacra and symbols to finally produce a comprehensive questioning on what might be known, communicated and engaged.

Salgado proved his very developed understanding of the tactical dynamics of today communication by using policies of signification of both the symbol and of the simulacrum: his long-term project *Genesis* has explicitly relied on the latter over the former to solicit implicit rhetorical questions and explicit answers. Instead, my communicative strategy for the Hawza work relies on the un-finished and the un-defined as paths of visual engagements. The resulting interrogative stance is further supported by the absence of captions as it develops along the boundary separating the most effective semantic openness from the most contained noise fuzziness (Eco 1989b). Because of the phenomenological dimension of semantic production, such a boundary is rather mobile and dramatically unfixed, and might lead to completely unexpected significations: with my choice, I remain aware of the extent to which I might un-constrain the traumatic quality of today's communication of Islam for which hegemonic patterns might thoroughly reshape signifying practices.

In such a context, the objectification of audiences remains a crucial research element and cannot be ignored, even for any open policy of signification: in spite of any appreciation of the human being as a communicative hub, there is no engagement without a clearly 'imagined' audience as otherwise all communication would be truly un-responsive. Even

though I could not predict who would be at my exhibitions, I nevertheless expected audiences at Oxford to be both 'academic' and 'knowledgeable about Islam.' These same audiences might also be 'Muslim,' and within the Muslim tag, either 'Muslim-born' or 'Muslim-converted,' 'Muslim lay' or 'fully devoted,' even though dis-interested Muslim would be rather un-expected so. I could address them as being 'Shi'a,' although they might be 'Sunni' too, as was the case with a couple with whom I had a long discussion at the British Museum. Of course, the same applies to all social contexts precisely because these contexts are *public*: as much as I identify a projected audience for each of my impact policies, this is a merely theoretical, though valuable, communicative exercise.

As identities are complex and multifaceted rhizomatic multiplicities, it follows that all policies of communication and engagement remain tentative, if not thoroughly *fictional*. Such a theoretical framework constantly questions all participating identities, from the photographer to the audiences, and promotes the concurrent rearrangement of media forms and communicative formats. The media landscape changes constantly: today it does so with unparalleled speed as new dynamics and forms of engagement increasingly rely on the digital to thoroughly signify both personal and social practices.

I have argued for montage as a practice complementing the signification of the stand-alone photograph. For its relational quality the 'photograph' is seldom used as a stand-alone medium, as it signifies *because of* a wider semantic space, be it the audience's background (as in the case of Marco's press conference), a semantic projection (as the Spanish case suggested), or its hierarchical relation with the verbal (as in the case of Mentor).

The photograph, alongside its semantic relation with the verbal in mixed media communication, produces narratives through its hieroglyphic-like features and alternative

sequences out of the same images invite diverse semantic significations. As proposed above, montage further enhances the generative and creative possibilities of visual communication even though, in the end, it is audiences who 'make meanings.' My incoming idea of the Meta-Image is specifically finalised to incorporate the meaning production of audiences as part of the discussion the image raises: its aim is not to deter or ignore such a participatory attitude, but, on the contrary, positively incorporate it within today's continuously evolving digital framework.

## **[Chapter Five] Signifying The Meta-Image - Conclusions**

## **[CHAPTER FIVE]**

### **SIGNIFYING THE META-IMAGE – CONCLUSIONS**

I'm more interested in a photography that is 'unfinished' – a photography that is suggestive and can trigger a conversation or dialogue (Pellegrin 2013).

My PhD research offered me a privileged opportunity to integrate theoretical investigation with fieldwork reflection, and articulate the terms of the comprehensive framework based upon the Meta-Image paradigm and the Public Cultures 2.0 format. My understanding of the increasing complexities of today's cultures and communicative forms has developed through the challenges of my encounter with the world of the Hawzas: out of this experience, I came to question identities at large, thus including both those in front and behind the camera.

Through the prolonged engagement with the subject 'Hawzas' I have concurrently explored the extent to which photographs do not replicate the Real, but are the result of the comprehensive signification of the Real with that of the representation. Likewise, 'meanings' might belong outside the frame, and within personal identities and social dynamics. These considerations have supported my model of communication to foster a central role for the usage of aesthetics as semantics: the appreciation of aesthetics as intended and finalized communication is undoubtedly the first result of my analysis of the Hawzas. Upon the identification of the increasingly traumatized and multifaceted signification of visual cultures of Islam, I have attentively defined photography as semantics without ontology; because of the temporary and un-finished quality of the 'image' as preferred to the photograph, I have eventually identified my research findings in the form of the Meta-Image and of Public Cultures 2.0.

Above, I have contextualised how established approaches to visual communication have favoured an understanding of the photograph as an illustration and a sign of metonymical mirroring: traditionally, a photographed pipe has coincided with the simple representation of a pipe, and such a direct relation has inspired plain unequivocal understandings. Concurrently, I have explored the extent to which the signification of a photograph might be found more precisely in the personal background of the audience: the assessment built on the digital photograph as the product of the signification of the Real with that of the representation to invite an approach to audiences as 'communicative hubs.'

As I will address below, the passage from the analogue to the digital has raised issues of both medium consistency and overall media ontology, and questioned the specific role of photojournalism as a witness to the Real: this will be here finalised to complement my understanding of the digital photograph as 'semantics without ontology.' In addition, the digital quality of today's media is ontologically altering all concerned social spaces of interaction: mobile and smart phones, tablets and computers are not only new objects, but radically distinct human experiences. In such a context, the availability of new technologies and affordability of always new media outlets promote their unparalleled diffusion, and arguably support a thoroughly media-led cultural space.

In the next section I intend to further explore the extent to which the digital is reshaping forms of visual and multimedia production, knowledge distribution and media consumption in relation to the overwhelming centrality of today's aesthetics. One personal example should suffice to illustrate the revolutionary dimension of the new digital media landscape. I began working as a photojournalist in 1996 free-lancing for the Sunday football game in my town. At that time, we would leave the football pitch a few minutes before the end of the game to avoid being stuck in the traffic, and develop and print the photographs before taking them to the newsroom as physical objects: we could hope no one scored after our

departure. In the darkroom, we had very little space for post-production because of the medium limitation and time constraints. Often we would realise only when developing the film that we had not included the ball in the shot: adding it in post-production would prove painful and overall unfeasible with the result of being left without valuable photographs.

The conditions were already different a few years later when I got employed to do the same job in 2002. We had digital camera but both the limitations of the tool and of the digital software then available would make corrections still very painful *but doable*: we could add the ball in a ball-less shot and save the day. Nowadays, conditions are once more thoroughly different. Not only I would be able to shoot and easily post-produce the RAW file while at the stadium, but I would have to do so to allow online sport sites to cover the game *live*; most probably, I would also have to tweet my impression of the game and my own emotive status while doing the coverage. I would also have to engage my followers on Facebook and Twitter, and possibly comment and discuss their own coverage of the same events: all this would be required as part of my job description, and I would have to concurrently compete with a large number of providers and amateur photojournalists who would be happy to work for free to experience being a photographer at the stadium: as a result, I wonder whether the adjective 'digital' might be capable of ontologically differentiate the two practices. As it were not already enough, in March 2014 Getty Images freed for non-commercial usage the whole of its digital archive, thus ending for good the era of the professional photographer.

My PhD thesis has aimed to explore and theoretically posit some of the issues I touched above through the practice-led contextualisation of my photoreportages on the Hawzas. Through my analysis, I have encompassed within the common practice of aesthetics the signification of the Real and of the representation as my operative answer to issues of Orientalism, Orientalist visual archives and visual semantics. I will finalise my theoretical



perspectives in the form of the 'Meta-Image' and 'Public Cultures 2.0' as two research frameworks for the management of visual-led digital communication.

## THE META-IMAGE

### ***Today's Digital Framework***

If the photograph, as seen in the case of Aranda's Yemenite *Pieta* is not what it is, then, new epistemological trajectories and ontological frameworks should be explored and properly researched. This is the background rationale for much of my research as I connect and re-contextualise these issues through my Meta-Image paradigm: this final chapter will explore the subject, its definition and social relevance, as well as offer a few suggestions for its usage for current processes of visual communication of Islam.

Above, I have touched upon the way the digital is not only expanding visual fields of reference and contextualisation but affecting today's social practices and dynamics. If this new adjective, 'digital,' is not approached as a mere attribute to the photograph but as its ontological constituent, it follows that a digital portrait is closer to an MP3 file than to the same portrait as shot on analogue film: this is fully motivated upon their shared digital codes and binary sequences of zeroes and ones. My assessment further epitomises just one among the many readjustments the new media landscape has been promoting through the unparalleled diffusion of portable devices such as tablets and mobile phones. In such a context, a single object has become a multi-functional *tool* with the possibility of making phone calls while sending SMS as well as connecting to the Web while shooting photographs and videos: its multitasking dimension and trans-media capability is explicit and overwhelming.

It is widely assumed that mobile phones are killing cameras (Shankland 2011) and that the social network Flickr is reshaping forms of visual and online communication; incidentally, this intertwines with the production of the metonymical ugly archives I mentioned above. The Nielsen Institute acknowledges that by February 2012 smartphones accounted for 50% of the US mobile phone market (Engadget 2012), predicting an overall smartphone penetration of 80% in Africa by 2014 (Techcrunch 2012). Arguably, such a trend is expected to further progress across the globe, with the steady establishment of smartphones as *the* world communicative device. However, at least within the terms of my analysis, the acknowledgement of the widespread dissemination of digital devices does not imply or assess any concurrent specific usage: in fact, now more than ever, “the Internet is [just] what you make of it” (Fusari 2001).

I have previously argued how the digital has finally exposed the ontological fragility of photography and questioned its assertive power. The teleological mission of photography to copy Nature and objectively record events has been re-contextualised in a way parallel to what happened in the social sciences with post-modernism. In spite of the vast majority of practitioners still preserving a self-reassuring positivistic stance for both anthropology and photojournalism, the horizontal dimension of contemporary cultures, the rejection of the juxtaposition of low versus high culture, and the focus on wider encompassing paradigms reframe both epistemological and ontological concerns: the result is the steady progress and continuous re-arrangement of today’s digital social cultures.

Simultaneously, theoretical research has brought into question not only the social as increasingly multiple and un-narratable but the personal in the same notion of the ‘human being.’ As a few anthropologists have been exploring, the categorisation between man and woman might soon be out-dated as something like “one in a hundred births” is assessed to genetically “differ from standard male or female” (ISNA 2012a; ISNA 2012b).

Recently, Germany acknowledged the possibility of stating a 'third sex' in official documents (BBC 2013), and it seems that cultural systems might have to identify new ways to manage the personal and the social (ABC 2013a; ABC 2013b; Transgender 2014): as a result, possibilities for linear and univocal patterns of signification, representation and analysis have become increasingly debatable. The critical attitude of cultural and media studies is incorporating the digital and the Web 2.0 paradigm as constituents of identities and social practices (Gauntlett 2012) while inviting a renewed role for the sensorial.

### ***Engaging 2.0***

I have previously suggested the extent to which the digital revolution is shaping a whole new world: this applies to cultures, politics, media and all social practices. Overall, the social media penetration rate is continuous and steady, and its implicit ideology not only unquestioned but reclaimed at every opening of an Apple store. Besides both professional and entertainment features, iPads are increasingly used for educational purposes too, not only in higher educational contexts but increasingly so for primary schools too: what seems now avant-garde might seem pretty normal in 2020 (Spiegel 2013). The social status new media evoke is worth any 'Apple tax' (Reuters 2012), but it would be erroneous to limit these social and cultural dynamics to the 'Western' world only, as they are truly worldwide. As Qualman argues, we "don't have a choice on whether we DO social media, the question is how well we do it" (Qualman 2013, emphasis in the original).

However, these new dynamics are not value-free. I do not call into question the environmental or social costs, but evince the extent to which public understanding of the digital has not been improved by its overwhelming presence, in a way similar to much of current visual research. In fact, as much as new practices inform new policies, they

equally preserve previous forms of cultural production and consumption: Facebook is an innovative and creative tool (Bell 2012) which might be used instead to chat with work colleagues in the next room.

The digital is here promoted as a tool and a medium of pivotal relevance, and I believe that current processes of signification might be fully understood only upon its comprehensive assessment. The established argument against multimedia and online formats of representation has mainly focused on their temporariness, as a website might be unavailable much sooner than a printed book. However, new forms of interactive e-books are being produced to disseminate 'verbal' culture as part of comprehensive multimedia formats. By evolving into a hybrid format intertwining a multiplicity of different media, interactive e-books are booming as further supported by free software, extremely cheap production costs and very effective cross-formats practices. In such a framework, *The Guardian* is reissuing some of its e-books as 'enhanced' e-books, i.e. e-books with interactive multimedia features, and so is doing academia with an increasing attention. The main features of this format include, but are not limited to, the audiences' engagement of multiple communicative layers to articulate diverse media forms alongside Internet links: by connecting to an expanding online world, 'readers' can further consolidate their learning experience via social media and use it as an unparalleled opportunity to move beyond traditional practices of knowledge production and dissemination.

## ***Overcoming The Photographic Paradigm***

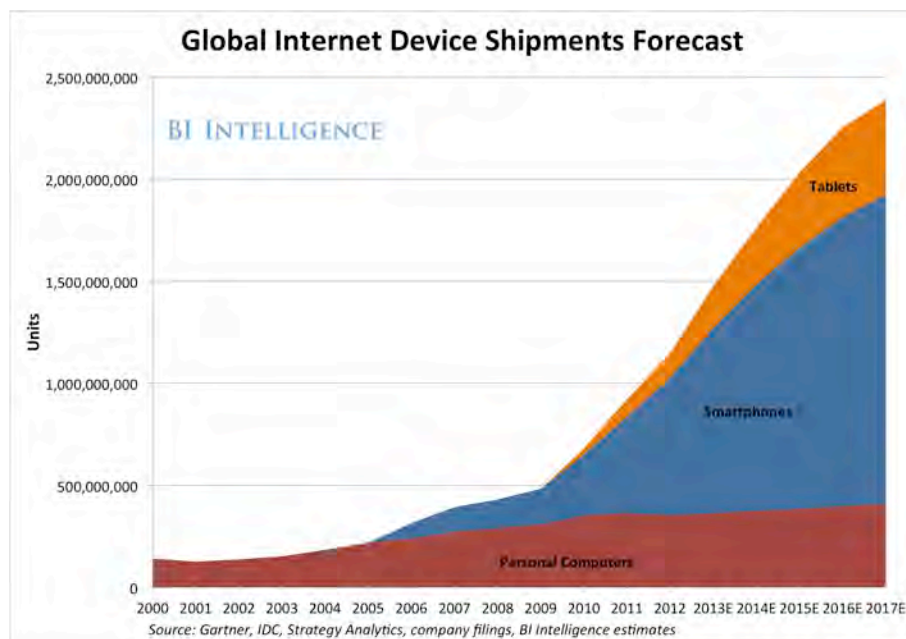


*Believers waiting for Pope Benedict XVI (above) and Pope Francis' (below) first appearances.*

*Copyrights as indicated, source: [pic.twitter.com/SeA5VhW6Lk](https://pic.twitter.com/SeA5VhW6Lk).*

Regardless of any chosen theoretical outlook or research perspective, the extent to which the digital component of today's communication is re-arranging both personal practices and social interactions should be now incontestable. The whole world is filled up with new (mostly digital) objects; 1983 was a benchmark year with *Time's* celebration of the computer as 'Man of the Year' and the parallel establishment of the first mobile phone network. Since then, mobile communication has expanded to reach a total of 5 billion units in 2010, with an unconfirmed peak of over 6 billion units in mid 2012. In many Western countries the penetration rate is higher than 130% (BBC 2010), and in Africa, the

most undeveloped continent, it is assessed at around 72% of the population, and connections have “more than doubled over the past four years” (Aviat 2013). At the same time, the Internet has just celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, and it is booming with impressive penetration rates across the whole world through the diffusion of mobile devices.



*Global Internet Device Shipments Forecast.*

Concurrently, the pivotal role that social media has attained in a very short time cannot be ignored: in the US, one out of five divorces are blamed on Facebook, more than 20% of couples meet online, and the rate is more than 60% for gay people (Qualman 2013); these processes are mirrored in less personal and more political contexts, as the Arab Spring developments and the Obama campaigns have largely testified. In such a context, the *Innocence of Muslims* video has dramatically challenged the understanding and management of online and multimedia communication and contributed with the *Kony 2012* campaign to articulate a thoroughly new media landscape: by changing social dynamics, media is radically reshaping cultural worlds too.

Through mobile communication, the digital asset has become the pivot of a new way of thinking and living, and the digital photograph can be assessed as its most relevant manifestation. Regardless of any visual turn, digital natives are increasingly redrawing cultural maps and redefining both economic and social patterns: for instance, parents and grandparents have been reported to sign in on Facebook simply to be 'friends' with the rest of their family (Parenting 2012; Yahoo! 2012).

The digital photograph is progressively expanding its semantic realm to become a medium of absolute relevance, both because of its diffusion and its communicative impact. At the same time, the digital has radically altered forms of representation of the Real, and produced a medium which is both more contiguous to and consistent with other contemporary digital forms than to its previous analogue one. Even though the practice of photography has remained very much the same (pre-production > production > post-production), its digital quality has ontologically altered the whole of its features.

The extent to which actions such as light exposure metering, shooting speeds, camera recording settings, storage procedures and editing techniques epitomise today's paradigm shift is still debatable: once the juxtaposition between analogue and digital is interpreted around the discriminant of the line of action (i.e. look > shoot > edit), then all photographers follow the same procedures. However, once the focus is shifted towards the *social* meaning of current practices and their processes of signification, then the ontological rupture with its analogue form is evident, and with that the need for a comprehensive rethinking of the medium 'photograph.'

The popular dimension and its social components have added new functions and changed semantic and aesthetic forms: the photograph is much more than a material product, and has become a new cultural and social space of engagement. McLuhan's visionary notion

of the “global village” (McLuhan 2003: 43) implicitly reconnects to social platforms like Facebook and ‘horizontal’ political campaigns such as *Kony 2012*. New ideas of personal and social identities are reshaping cultural boundaries, even though their ‘virtual’ dimension has been used to explicitly question any real impact. However, to the deficient notion of the ‘virtuality of the real,’ the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has offered the new perspective of the ‘reality of the virtual’ (Žižek 2003), and suggested that all personal and social activities contribute to ‘make’ one single ‘real’ identity.

In such a context, Mitchell’s reference to McLuhan’s definition of the medium as an extension of man reframes “from the standpoint of sensory modality” (Mitchell 2005b: 397) the so-called ‘visual media’ into ‘mixed media.’ In fact,

from Aristotle’s observation that drama combines the three orders of *lexis*, *melos*, and *opsis* (words, music, and spectacle) to Barthes’ survey of the ‘image–music–text’ divisions of the semiotic field, the mixed character of media has been a central postulate (Mitchell 2005b: 397, emphasis in the original).

Mitchell challenges the ontology of diverse media through the diverse sensory ratios they possess as there are “no purely visual media because there is no such thing as pure visual perception in the first place” (Mitchell 2005b: 403). Consequently, “natural vision itself is a braiding and nesting of the optical and tactile” (Mitchell 2005b: 402). Regardless of their visual component, “writing, printing, painting, hand gestures, winks, nods, and comic strips are all ‘visual media,’ [but] this tells us next to nothing about them” (Mitchell 2005b: 403). Even painting and TV, two traditionally visually appreciated media, are mixed formats, and photography “might be better understood as a device for translating the unseen or unseeable into something that looks like a picture of something we could never see” (Mitchell 2005b: 398). Mitchell’s recognition of the mixed quality of media runs alongside the renewed centrality of the sensorial, and aims to redraw the terms of today’s



media forms. In such a context, the cultural and technological developments of the last decade, with the Web 2.0 as a new cultural paradigm, arguably require new conceptual frameworks: as an example I like to mention the University of Stanford innovative online cultural offer (Koller 2012), and the free online academic modules of iVersity (iVersity 2013).

It might be argued that photographs are like numbers: both are assumed to tell the truth, but they only are absolute figures that need to be contextualised. Hence, precisely because “media install a new culture in the heart of everyday life” (Poster 1995: 16), the new pivotal centrality of the digital is both the result and the promoter of those changes: in light of today’s media over-reaching dimensions and its crossover and mashup components, I promote my ontological re-assessment of the digital photograph as the product of the signification of the Real and the representation..

### ***The Digital Photograph***

Even though photography might seem to have preserved the linearity of its processes (pre-production > production > post-production), I suggest that the digital paradigm is thoroughly redefining previous epistemologies into a new (un-finished) framework. Re-arranging semantics around a synchronic trans-media perspective instead of diachronically along media notions invites a truly revolutionary assessment: the digital photograph of an aeroplane might be ontologically more consistent with a Word document or a MP3 audio file than to its analogue version.

Over its rather short history, photography has been mainly used to convey significations based on the assumption that a pipe is a pipe. Unfortunately, too often both the author and her audiences have believed that to be both immanently and metaphysically applicable. The digital asset of today’s photography is not solely questioning the partial

perspective through which the eyes see, the mind chooses and the finger impresses the recording device: instead, it re-contextualises the whole process of representation within the terms of a thoroughly new technology, a new form, a new interface and completely new and extremely widespread social practices. Within such a theoretical framework, I have assessed the digital photograph, if such a material object can be separated from its intertwined digital dynamics, as 'semantics without ontology.' My definition recognises the extent to which the photograph endless significations dissolve the boundaries between agencies, recording tool and media dynamics, and promotes the idea of the human agency as a communicative hub.

In such a context, not only is the digital photograph an un-finished and evolving sequence of zeroes and ones but so are its transmission procedures and publishing platforms, as even though a digital file might be printed on analogue materials, this happens less and less. Ritchin notes how we

must accept that photography is increasingly a post-production medium. It is used for multimedia, a still image might be from a video. We can embed, geotag. We're [only] dealing with computer data (Ritchin 2011).

The analogue photograph used to be easily assessed within Platonic categories by differentiation of the latent picture from the photograph; today's digital paradigm has instead informed the visual sign of its main qualities, the un-defined, because of its cross-media consistency, and the un-finished, because of its endless post-production quality. Such a framework invites the re-contextualisation of the signification of the Real as merely propaedeutic to the signification of the representation: I have fostered the verisimilar as an alternative approach to realism, and suggested a new operative framework for aesthetics.

By re-arranging the relation between the sign, the symbol and the simulacrum, I have assessed the sign as the 'material' which is first signified by the photographer as Real, and then communicated as an intended representation to her audiences. Practices of production and post-production continuously juxtapose open and closed forms of communication, thus producing symbols and simulacra, respectively.

I have used my three photoreportages on the Shi'a seminaries in Syria and Bahrain, the Hawzas, as the test cases to assess, question, and develop my theoretical perspectives. I have worked my hypotheses around a practice-led framework, setting my own work as pivot. I have sustained my research through the expertise I have developed as a photoreporter and multimedia author, and upon the exhibitions I have been producing together with the formative occasions I have been facilitating. The resulting outlook has allowed me to contextualise my theoretical research within a frame of references I had full access to: this proved crucial in addressing the problem of unconscious, unexpected or un-thought photographic significations. As a result of that, I have focused on a mostly communicative analysis for which significations are solely addressed when 'intended.' Through the cases of Marco and the Spanish scholar I have also approached the issue of reception and the extent to which communicative dynamics might be 'disturbed' because of projective and personal issues.

In such a theoretical context, I have not aimed to produce any simulacrum of post-modernist theories as applied to visual cultures, and specifically to photography: by recognising the fictional quality of the realist paradigm, I came to appreciate the phenomenological component of today's practices of signification. These dynamics have been identified for every stage of the signification process, from the shooting to the dissemination of the digital file. Involved identities are "being-in-time" and, as such, their engagement in the world is mostly inscribed by specific constraints of time and space;

besides their *hic et nunc* dimension, identities were approached as communicative hubs which endlessly re-frame and re-signify their practices.

The phenomenological framework I identified upon the work of Merleau-Ponty and Coole was applied to intended representations in form of symbols and simulacra. Symbols are open-ended processes of signification, whereas simulacra are rather static “dead symbols.” In such a context, the notion of the simulacrum does not imply any negative connotation as that which fails to represent or falsifies the Real; instead, it was approached as a value-free policy. However, even though the same identity might access one representation in forms of symbols and simulacra because of distinct *hic et nunc* settings, photographs are not all equally capable of producing symbols and simulacra.



*Nick Ut's photograph of the napalm girl in Vietnam © Nick Ut / AP, 1972.*



*Aranda's World Press Photograph of 2012 © Samuel Aranda, 2012.*

The artificial juxtaposition between the two photographs above is intended to show that symbols and simulacra are performative practices arranged by the photographer for the signification of the Real and, then, for the representation. Ut's photograph might have been shot to invite a simulacrum-like engagement, as that which *aims to* univocally state a single meaning, that of the US 'terrorist' bombings of Vietnam. Conversely, Aranda's image presents a much larger and un-constrained space of signification with an overall abundance of Puncta to turn into distinct Revealing Indexes.

Arguably, when a photographer gets her pictures, she is not necessarily, and in my opinion, *never* consciously concerned about later practices of signification. As much as the video maker relies heavily and rather constantly on a story board and a tentative script, photographers gauge the moment and remain *aware* of the ways to get a good photograph: we signify the Real by being 'in-the-world' and remain proactive and responsively looking for *the* decisive moment.

In this context, my practice-led research allowed me to manage possible unconscious significations of the representation by assessing received understandings against my intended policies: by explicitly disentangling the digital photograph from its analogue counterpart, I do not differentiate between different kinds of photography, but, instead, point out the extent to which the digital photograph is thoroughly consistent with other digital forms. The tripartite set of looking, shooting and post-producing might be acknowledged as common to both analogue and digital production. However, the material and social quality of the digital photograph is radically different, and such a change motivates and further supports the rationale for my hypothesis: a digital portrait is epistemologically closer to an MP3 file than to the same portrait as shot on an analogue device.

Concurrently, I have suggested the notion of the digital photograph as ‘semantics without ontology.’ Instead of researching either the discipline or the material object as an independent subject, my practice-led perspective has explored how I produce photographs (the signification of the Real), and signify them through the post-production practices of aesthetics and montage (the signification of the representation). In today’s digital world, post-production is a widely used and extremely easy activity which is increasingly promoted by two contemporary dynamics: on one side, it is already part of the daily life of (almost) the whole world population with its overwhelming presence in each and every mobile device. On the other side, its requirements are continuously simplifying, as post-producing software has become thoroughly available, cheap and immediate.

### ***Digital Aesthetics***

By exploring both the visual production and its post-production, I have encompassed within a shared umbrella all features and activities from the pre- to the post-production. I

have also suggested the extent to which any change in the medium design leads to the concurrent alteration of the photographer's engagement 'in-the-world.' As an example, the vast majority of today's digital devices rely on a rear screen to frame the shooting: this is radically different from the small viewfinder analogue cameras used to have with its much wider perspective on the frame outside. Furthermore, digital photographs are by far the result of mobile phone production, which in turn informs distinct ways of looking and promotes new ways of being 'in-the-world.'

The wide-ranging possibilities to either consciously or automatically frame the Real parallel the features available for the post-production practice in the signification of the representation. I have assessed processes of signification as increasingly a matter of maths and verisimilitude for today's thoroughly digital world: the perfect integration of distinct media forms *in* and *for* diverse and very post-producible formats across diverse platforms is comprehensively challenging notions of single medium and of material consistency. I avoid evoking the out-dated dichotomy between the 'virtual' and the 'real' as I recognise any 'virtual' practice as thoroughly 'real:' today's expanding multimedia and mixed media engagement stimulates new practices of signification through its immediacy and ease of production and dissemination. Photographic practice has become the centre of a thoroughly interconnected and intertwined digital space in which visual semantics is ever-present but still very much misplaced.

I have personally lived the changes the news market has gone through in the last ten years or so: both the role of the journalist and that of the photojournalist have changed dramatically, and the latter has been rendered redundant from a business point of view (Chicago-SunTimes 2013). New economic policies have both recognised the centrality of today's Web 2.0 and dismissed previous business models for the photographic world:

Getty Images, possibly the most important photographic agency, has recently freed for non-commercial usage the whole of its digital archive (Getty 2014).

The photograph is progressively more and more an illustrative caption to a verbal title for a verbally centred communication: this is the result of many concurrent socio-political and economic dynamics which impact local news markets differently. Newspapers and magazines have become mere carriers for advertisements, and media agencies are focused on maximising their ROI (return on investment) for the decaying business of news media. In order to accomplish that, media promote a smooth environment for which images, much more than news stories, are pivotal in keeping readers on the page: the result is the progressive domestication of news imageries with the concurrent passage from photojournalism to editorial photography (Ritchin 2010).

The resulting new media landscape has turned photographers into providers of 'raw signs' as visual stories are no longer a discussion between photographers and audiences through the photo editors, but, sadly, between photo editors and advertising agencies. The news market has eventually turned into a 'caption' to advertisements rather than the opposite.

In such a scenario, today's culture continuously proves to be mainly, if not wholly, verbally centred, despite endless tropes of the opposite. News and media are verbally constructed and semantically centred on their written component. Newspapers use photographs in a very limited manner as a purely illustrative medium to 'spice up' editorial communication as Meredith Artley, Managing Editor Of CNN.com, very candidly admitted in August 2013 (CNN 2013). Even more worryingly, news images are being blurred with advertising not only on paper, but on the Internet too (Guardian 2011): this is an established trend even though its



development cannot be precisely contextualised for each and every cultural context or local news market.

Both William Mitchell and Peter Greenaway have been very effective in theoretically contextualising the trope of the visual in contemporary societies as approached from both academia and the creative industries. Mitchell recognises that

the supposed “hegemony of the visible” in our times (or in the even ever-flexible period of “modernity,” or the equally flexible domain of “the West”) is a *chimera* that has outlived its usefulness [...] As for the question of “hegemony,” what could be more archaic and traditional than the prejudice in favour of sight? Vision has played the role of the “sovereign sense” since God looked at his own creation and saw it was good, or perhaps even earlier when he began the act of creation with the division of the light from the darkness (Mitchell 2005b: 349, emphasis added).

Greenaway implicitly confirms such a perspective, based upon the expertise he developed in his years as a filmmaker and multimedia producer. He recognises the extent to which our communication is text-based in the spoken and the written word: as a consequence, our visual culture is undernourished and ill informed...

Why should it be otherwise? We have a text-based culture. Our educational system teaches to value text over image, which is one of the reasons why we have such an impoverished cinema. Just because you have eyes does not mean to say that you can see. From childhood, when we are persuaded to learn the alphabet, through adolescence, when we are taught a mass vocabulary and refine our word skills, to adulthood when we never finish polishing our ability to communicate through words (Greenaway 2008: 00:06:25 – 00:07:37).

### ***The Multimedia Photograph***

Because of the overwhelming and, to me, unquestionable verbal-centred dimension of contemporary digital societies, I intend to integrate the photograph within wider multimedia formats for grass roots digital production (Van Lohuizen 2012) and counter-cultural practice (Anderson 2011). The booming possibilities for autonomous and self-funded projects parallel the expanding attention towards new hybrid formats of signification of the Real and of the representation. Within such a framework, enhanced e-books might provide an option to include multimedia perspectives and explore, research, and disseminate even niche subjects. The Meta-Image will be promoted as an updated possibility to the long-standing debate in signification practice: as both a tactic and a strategy, it is a paradigm for the development of digital-centred multimedia practice and the parallel fostering of the visual within mixed media formats.

I have made explicit the extent to which my phenomenological framework inscribe all personal and social spaces of engagement. I have equally differentiated the digital photograph from its analogue form and suggested an appreciation of photography as semantics without ontology. I have equally relied on the acquired centrality of media to thoroughly re-contextualise signifying practices, and re-centre the sensitive region of emotions and inter-subjective encounters (Mitchell and Hansen 2010: 88-100). As a result, mobile and smartphones, tablets and computers appear to be not only new tools, but new comprehensive ways of experiencing and engaging the Real. As an example, increasingly more people might be seen to attend concert not to listen to live music, but to record and distribute YouTube videos instead.



*50 cents' fans at a concert in Beirut in 2006. Source:*

*<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/06/28/world/bands-urge-fans-to-ditch-phones/>*

Hence, availability of new technologies and the affordability of media outlets promote their unparalleled diffusion and support a thoroughly media led new world. As much as the digital component makes current processes of media production unique, its grammar of signification can be traced back to previous communicative practices: the human being has constantly aimed to signify her world.

The issue of how visibility has been digested in the academic field has proven central: I have focused my attention on visual anthropology, as it is the most recognised research field dealing with production and consumption of visual knowledge. In such a context, I have reasserted my devoted attention to anthropology not as a discipline but as a concerned space of analysis; through my Meta-Image paradigm I aim to use the digital to overcome the traditional juxtaposition between academia and the creative industries, and rearrange traditional forms of knowledge production and dissemination in a thoroughly new way. The fact that Wikipedia has been rated equal in reliability to the *Encyclopaedia*

*Britannica* (CNET 2005; Taraborelli 2012; Wikipedia 2013) might be appreciated as a most revealing example.

At the same time, the digital component of today's communication is seemingly fading off semantic differences *for*, *among* and *across* media. Post-production practice is continuously intertwining notions of the Real and the representation for which popular usages might have succeeded where decades of extremely sophisticated post-modernist theory did not. Digital cultural production is further blurring the difference between photograph and video both at a production and consumption moment: the photograph is a single still image and video production uses either 24 or 30 frames (i.e. images) per second to *simulate* the appearance of movement. However, not only the same device produces both still and moving images, but it has become quite common to find smartphones with recording capacities that rival professional cameras. Moreover, digital practices like the mashup and the so-called time lapse formats (Geraci 2012) are articulating new languages, communicative forms and representational platforms. As a consequence, the notion of hybridity has come to thoroughly re-arrange practices and formats upon its synchronic qualities. Web surfers have increasingly become subjects who both produce and consume media, and Web 2.0 platforms from YouTube to Wikipedia are very good examples indeed.

As I argued before, the form 'photograph' is no longer ontologically accessible as it might be best understood as mere semantics. By endlessly signifying and re-signifying contents *alongside*, *through* and *because of* its temporary semantic fields of inter-subjectivities, the digital photograph can no longer be conceived as the heir of its analogue form. As much as the medium 'camera' does not exist any more, so the shift from the photograph to the image might not be an epistemological asset but an unavoidable ontological necessity.

If the photograph is ontologically insufficient to portray the increasing complexities of visual significations, the image and the frame might represent valid alternatives instead. The two notions both offer very valid arguments for their usage, but I have preferred the idea of the image to that of the frame. Even though the latter identifies “a single *complete* picture in a series forming a movie, television, or video film,” it is strongly connoted by its “rigid structure that surrounds or encloses” (Oxford 2013a, emphasis added).

Whereas the frame is semantically constrained by the boundaries of its rigid structure, the image should better fit my argument through its immateriality. As Mitchell points out, the image “can be lifted off the picture, transferred to another medium, translated into a verbal ekphrasis, or protected by copyrighted law” (Mitchell 2005b: 85). Simply put, the image might be assessed as “the ‘intellectual property’ that escapes the materiality of the picture when it is copied” (Mitchell 2005b: 85). Such an immateriality is further complemented by its assessment as a “*quasi-perceptual experience* [which] resembles perceptual experience, but occurs in the absence of the appropriate external stimuli” (Stanford 2010, emphasis in the original). Hence, the engagement with an image might be triggered independently of its presence, or lead to very material consequences upon an immaterial evocation. On one side, Secretary of State Colin Powell argued for the military invasion of Iraq in 2003 upon a set of ‘fake’ images; on the other, flashbulb memories have proven to substantially alter, if not thoroughly create *ex nihilo* images of memories which are ‘real’ to the subject *only* (Finkenauer 1998; Hamzelou 2011).

In such a context, the semantic and communicative qualities of the image are both unique and unparalleled within the visual media landscape. Images “are not perceived in the same way by viewers any more than we dream images; and they are not exclusively visual in any important way, but involve multisensory apprehension and interpretation” (Mitchell 1986: 14). Like I previously did for colour, the image is here acknowledged for its world-

making capability: it is the centre of an extremely complex and articulated hub of social significations which are both ruled and motivated upon the sensorial dimension of media engagements. As noted, images do not even necessitate a picture to communicate, and are equally solicited through a mere verbal note: they are life-forms and their meaning-production is arguably promoting and fostering new practices, as

media are not just materials, but material practices that involve technologies, skills, traditions and habits. The medium is more than the material and more than the message, more than simply the image plus the support (Mitchell 2005b: 198).

The relation between the analogue and the digital strongly informed recent debates, and new epistemological and ontological perspectives have been produced to manage its rapid changes (among many: Elkins 2011). Within such a theoretical framework, I have suggested the extent to which the progressive digitalisation of the form 'photograph' has produced a new medium, and not a new sub-discipline to its family tree.

### ***The Hyperphotograph***

Recently, Ritchin has offered a capital advancement to the current debate through his pivotal concept of the Hyperphotograph; his paradigm acknowledges how

digital photography's relationship to space, to time, to light, to authorship, to other media will make it clear that it represents an essentially different *approach* than does analogue photography [as the] photograph's frame, heretofore simply a container for the image, can now store a variety of hidden information that can help to contextualize and amplify the image's meanings" (Ritchin 2009: 141-143, emphasis added).

With his argument, Ritchin approaches the digital issue within the terms of a new empowerment of the form 'photograph' within mixed media formats: in constructive disagreement with Ritchin, I prefer to acknowledge the necessity of a completely new

outlook through my preference for the (meta) image over the (hyper) photograph. I will here use Ritchin's research to better clarify the creative features of the image, and suggest its meta qualities: as the Hyperphotograph and my Meta-Image build on the new social environment and the trans-media dimension of current cultures and media, they both offer a renewed solution to the old problem of signification.

Ritchin recognises the digital photograph as a still valid and effective form in which the 'hyper' facilitates intended meanings and devalues spin (Ritchin 2009: 149). He explicitly assesses the Hyperphotograph as a tool of socio-political engagement and realistic capabilities, which will inform the future with enough realism to promote socio-political engagement. Ritchin's management of digital possibilities can arguably be accessed as consistent with the tradition of photojournalism rather than photoreportage, of generation as preferred to creation: with these juxtapositions I restate how the two perspectives carry distinct relations to the signification of the Real for which, roughly speaking, photojournalism generates information and photoreportage creates communication.

In Ritchin's analysis, the hyper component promotes new signification processes as its digital dimension supports innovative semantic engagements between the portraying subject and the portrayed one. Such a format empowers all agencies concerned and advances a shared interpretation of the Real: it is as though the whole debate on Aranda's photograph could be encapsulated as layers for the single digital format of the Hyperphotograph. By appreciating the "outsider-insider collaboration [as] a productive conversation among profoundly different points of view, each seeing some of what the other misses" (Ritchin 2009: 157), Ritchin evokes a positivistic framework: the Hyperphotograph is to him a tool to re-direct the communicative power of the photograph within an informative outlook.

Though I recognise the promising possibilities of such a format, I have come to differentiate my Meta-Image from his Hyperphotograph upon teleological concerns. As I will make explicit below, the two approaches use the digital component of today's visual (mixed) communication in a very similar manner, but to achieve distinct aims: Ritchin arguably believes the Truth to be out there to be achieved, understood, acknowledged and signified through his Hyperphotograph. I do not intend to dismiss the value of the 'Real,' as my background is in photojournalism too, but instead recognise the limited impact it has within phenomenological processes of signification. Hence, as much as I wished to tell the truth, there is no truth or, actually, there is no visible truth that might be communicated with an image.

Concurrently, the blurred boundaries separating 'manipulation' from 'alteration' or digital 'enhancement' might end up in an overly contested and fully arguable space of analysis. In constructive opposition to Ritchin's positivistic stance, I hence prefer to recognise the limitations of his approach, and suggest aesthetics as a semantic tool: with my Meta-Image paradigm I foster a photoreportage-inspired outlook which explores and questions instead of assessing. I recognise the controversial, un-refined and un-finished dimensions of communication as much as I do not plan to be the promoter of a thoroughly symbolic 'fictional' visual communication.

In my opinion, the photograph has ceased to exist as a positivistic carrier of information. Increasingly sophisticated production and post-production processes inform the image with multi-layered, multifaceted, mixed and multi-media components, features and possibilities. My usage of the meta notion explicitly recognises these new dynamics and allows the image to perform on both a vertical and horizontal scale: its vertical component expands the image semantics with multiple layers of signification in a much similar way to that of the Hyperphotograph. At the same time, its horizontal dimension reaffirms the



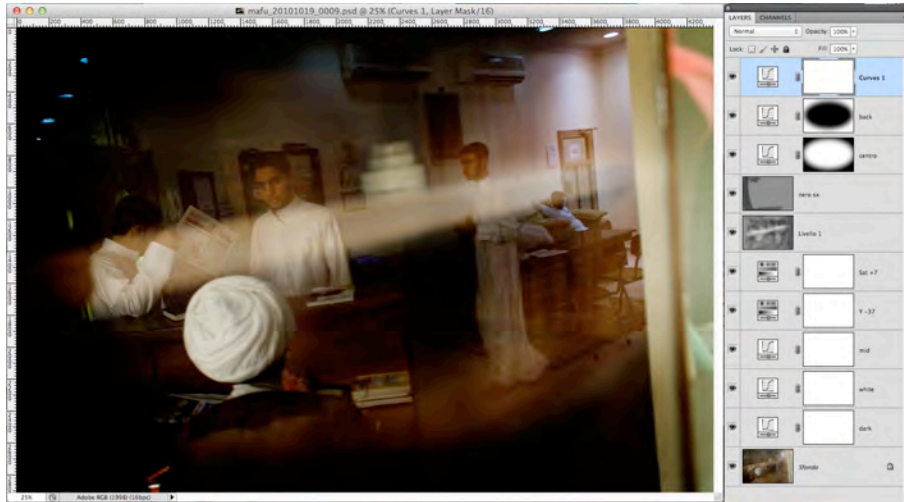
semantic creativeness of montage. The ultimate aim of my Meta-Image paradigm is thus “not [to] seek to re-establish the truth [but to] be meteorologically sensitive to stupidity” (Baudrillard 1995: 66-67): by recognising the ontological temporariness of its significations, the highly debatable assessment of the Real, and the expanding features of media forms and representational dynamics, I reaffirm the extent to which photography best questions rather than affirm.

### ***From Aesthetics To The Meta-Image***

I have defined aesthetics as the aware and finalised product of the signification of the Real with that of the representation. I have also recognised the extent to which aesthetics informs every phase of the signification process, from pre-production to post-production. Its phenomenological quality assesses the photograph as the very temporary by-product of distinct rhizomatic practices, events and performances. In such a theoretical context, the photographer frames her photograph not only with the contents she aims to record but with her personal background, intended aims, and un/conscious policies of signification.

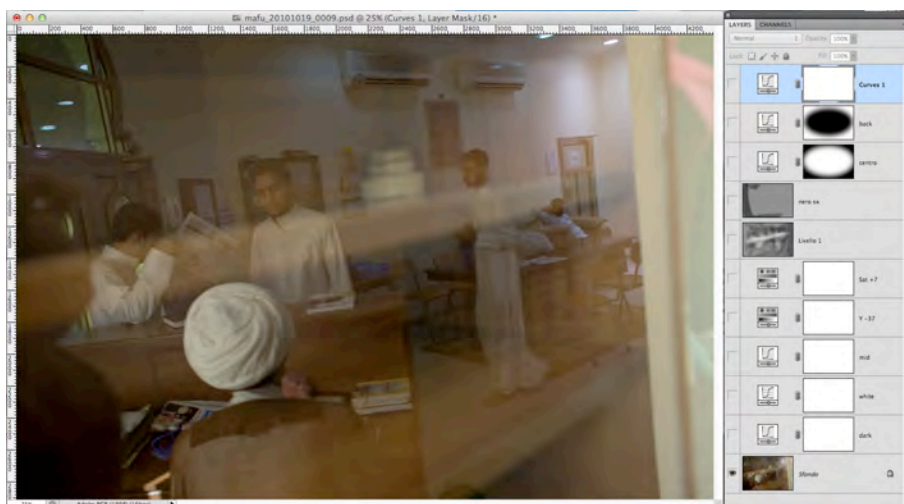
Hence, I invite the usage of aesthetics as that which aware informs distinct decision-making processes such as, among many, the recording perspective, the equipment used and possible references to previous aesthetic and cultural models (see the *Pieta* and Marco’s case studies as examples). Arguably, the Hyperphotograph has too the capability to layer the post-produced file with all sorts of informative features and contextualise its components, be them audio, verbal or visual. However, I used the *Simulacrum of the Blind* to argue how the Meta-Image might use a ‘fake’ signification of the Real to foster a ‘real’ (for me) signification of the representation. Alongside the controversial dynamics of communication, I fully acknowledge the unpredictability of audiences’ engagement with intended significations: Puncta become a un-predictable variety of Revealing Indexes

which the photographer might only direct and suggest, intend or never aim to affirm for her signification; to do so, the Meta-Image is equipped of both passive and interactive layers.



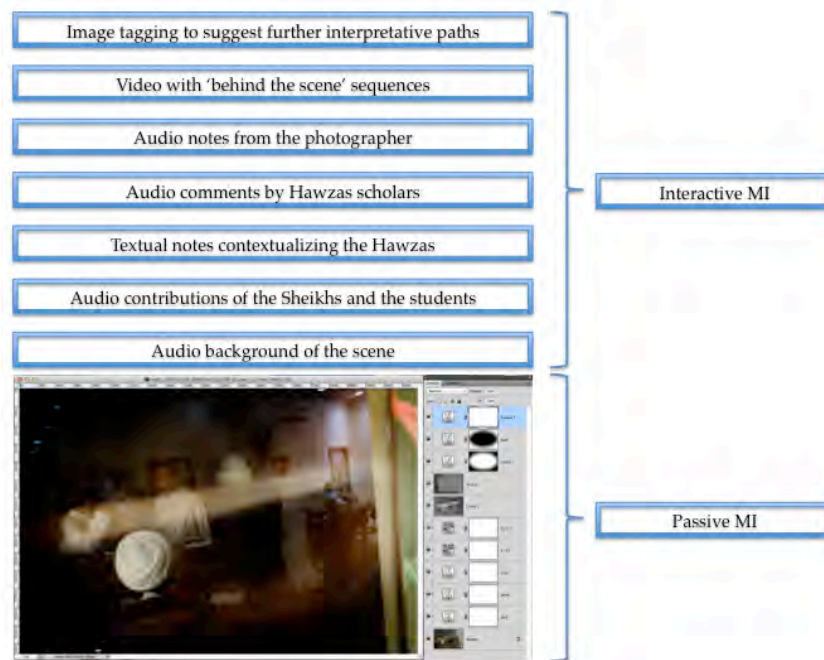
*Post-production layers for fusari\_hawza\_bahrain\_009 © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

In such a context, layers are passive when they are incorporated as a fully integrated constituent to the 'finalised' image, and cannot be negotiated. They are instead interactive when audiences decide what to activate and within which order.



*Post-production layers de-activated for fusari\_hawza\_bahrain\_009 © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

Consequently, audio, textual and video contributions depend upon audiences' engagement and interest, whereas the aesthetically finalised file of a post-produced image is offered un-negotiated.



*The vertical nesting of the Meta-Image.*

I have already paralleled my paradigm to Ritchin's and differentiated the two upon their teleologies: his informative perspective calls for a realist framework whereas I arrange my work within a mostly communicative outlook. My assessment of the Meta-Image paradigm as a practice as well as a theoretical approach finally recognises the tactical usage of distinct policies of representation around the un-finished quality of the digital: its relational quality is also fully temporary. I am aware of the possible consequences of my statement: because of the revolutionary quality of today's modal changes for academic knowledge production and dissemination, I invite to explore new digital practices instead of rejecting the way the frenetic quality of today's innovation *continuously* alter theoretical frameworks.

### ***The Meta-Image – A Recap***

My experience as a visual media researcher and producer constantly reminds me of the extent to which post-production might lead to rather debatable significations. The confrontation between ethics and aesthetics has also a long history of diverse solutions, none of which has yet proved final. Because of the digital revolution, new challenges have arisen to implicitly question the understanding of the Real, and of *which* Real. Final hybrid forms, formats and platforms mirror new social dynamics and re-arrange the temporariness of phenomenological significations.

The digital has often been treated in a consistent manner with its analogue form, and all codes of practice for photojournalists and visual researchers alike repeat vague principles such as “Be accurate and comprehensive in the representation of subjects,” or “Resist being manipulated by staged photo opportunities” (NPPA 2013). The alternative approach chosen by all photographic agencies pursues stricter policies with extremely questionable, if not truly debatable, outcomes.

Photographic practice keeps evolving at light speed and drawing the dividing line in ethical management of digital files remains a truly dramatic and troubling choice in a decaying media market with a booming number of newcomers. In such a scenario, photographic agencies have identified their discriminants in the post-produced adherence to the original un-post-produced file. Among many similar cases before, Klavs Christensen was disqualified from the 2009 Poy Contest upon his alleged overuse of tonal enhancement: his case might contribute to clarify the questionable boundaries differentiating ‘manipulation’ from ‘digital enhancing.’



*Christensen's Poy Contest Entry © Klavs Christensen 2009.*

The most widespread argument against post-produced files assesses manipulation as the result of either the replacing or the cloning of actual pixels, whereas digital enhancement refers to the overall or limited tonal alteration of the file. The juxtaposition is clearly a tentative attempt to preserve the documentary value of digital photography and limit, if not avoid, any mystification of the Real in the name of aesthetics. Such an endeavour is as

appreciable as it is terrifying for its implicit aim to preserve the vestiges of a realist and truly positivistic paradigm.

Like any other tool, Photoshop might be both aesthetically and semantically questioned, but using the original RAW file to assess the ethical 'truth' of a photograph seems to do more harm than good. I am aware that the aim of photojournalism is to depict and represent the Truth, but I question whether a more nuanced approach might contribute to a more 'realist' re-discussion of the assertive role of the photograph. As an example, two AP photojournalists, Alex Castro (ABC 2014) and Narciso Contreras (AP 2014) were laid off in the first weeks of 2014 as they both 'altered' their RAW files: expanding and all-encompassing post-production practices parallel the concern for photographic agencies to preserve their 'integrity' through the integrity of their members. As the new digital landscape has on one side dismissed film archives and, on the other, rendered post-production a virtually un-traceable practice, the shift from a thoroughly analogue to a thoroughly digital medium has yet to be fully understood and managed.

Acknowledging how the vast majority of NY agency photographers covered 9/11 with analogue media should effectively benchmark the speed of the current digital revolution. In such a context, adopting a unique stand for all cases might be understandable but extremely dangerous as Castro's removal of a hearing aid and Contreras' cloning of the background to cover a camera lying on the ground are not comparable to me: I understand that it is difficult to judge case by case and to motivate decisions with univocal standards, but new solutions need to be explored as Contreras' image in the trenches could not be reframed whereas Castro might have been. Once more, what is the Real and how could be represented to whom as what for what?

I have doubted at some length the photograph capability to convey an un-questionable Real upon the un-refined quality of the digital as a temporary medium of signification for an overlapping and fluid multimedia landscape. My notion of the human being as a communicative hub echoes that of the photograph as semantics without ontology as they both rely on the un-defined as their ontological paradigm. In such a context, rather rhetorically, would anyone ask a war correspondent to produce her notes while submitting the finalised article? Are not both practices concerned with the understanding, depiction and signification of the Real? Why, in the end, is there such a disparity of treatments for which proofs are required from the photojournalist but not from the journalist?

For almost a century respectable photojournalism has been shot primarily in black and white, an unquestionably artificial, if not 'fictional' colour-profiled signification of the Real. Nowadays, colour correction is strictly monitored while black and white photography is allowed a much wider space for post-production. As an example, world-famous photojournalists Paolo Pellegrin and Alex Majoli create over-post-produced images with deep contrasts and profound shadows in a manner which implicitly evokes the saturated tones of Christensen's images.





*Alex Majoli's photo © Majoli / Magnum. Source: [www.magnumphotos.com/](http://www.magnumphotos.com/).*



*Paolo Pellegrin photo © Pellegrin / Magnum. Source: [www.magnumphotos.com/](http://www.magnumphotos.com/).*

I understand there is an issue of *projected* realism (black and white is clearly perceived as 'fictional') but my argument is on a question of principle and not of taste, as negotiating the



semantic and aesthetic boundaries of post-production appear, increasingly, to be the ultimate space for today's images signification. I do not intend to juxtapose aesthetics to ethics as otherwise juries would have to consistently reject any post-produced black and white photograph. In fact, the issue at stake might not be the degree to which post-production is applied to inform photographic semantics, but, instead, the *rationale* upon which aesthetic choices are conducted (see the case of Walski): contextualising practices of communication by reference to intended policies of signification might eventually lead to defining the very much needed, but still missing, new practice-led aesthetics.

Finally, a wider issue of politics should be mentioned as photojournalists appear to be too often the scapegoat for today's policies of signification: all news media but radio are not in the position to arrange a whole news feed without imageries even if used as a pure ornament. Hence photographers are continuously on the frontline of every event and must be there on time; they are further required to produce engaging and strong, fully truthful significations. Yet, they are the first to be blamed for any mistake within the over-saturated decaying market of news media for which the photograph is still mostly understood like an analogue medium illustrating the Real.

Both the Hyperphotograph and my paradigm of the Meta-Image assess new ways to manage the complexities of the signification of both the Real and the representation for today's visual imageries. As much as the former relies on a positivistic pattern of signification, the latter argues for a paradigm change in favour of documentary as a style. Ritchin's outlook is possibly consistent with, belongs to, and builds upon the photojournalistic tradition, whereas my idea of the Meta-Image is more concerned with photoreportage. I recognise how both aim to develop open (Eco 1989b) signification processes incorporating other voices alongside that of the photographer. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim for my Meta-Image paradigm is not to represent the Real, but to turn the

photograph into a field of discussion. I hence assess the un-reliable, un-informative and un-representative quality of the Real not to romanticise identities or suggest their dismissal; instead, by contextualising and researching the extent to which visual dynamics are extremely contested and truly multifaceted, my Meta-Image idea promotes a new outlook on digital communication and its expanding interactive possibilities.

## **SIGNIFYING ISLAM**

### ***Ethics And Significations***

By continuously being either over-simplified by external actors or rather un-critically self-represented by internal figures, the Muslim world continues to be represented in very confrontational ways. Between these two opposites, Muslim communities engage a whole plane of 'traumatic' encounters with external researchers: the problems I encountered in my fieldwork and the repeated rejection of my proposed collaborations have endlessly reminded me of the rather difficult status of visual research on Islam.

The issue of 'representing Islam' is an established academic concern across a variety of disciplines, of which I explicitly recall anthropology and media studies. Alongside my professional story as a photojournalist and media consultant, I have academically researched the issue in Italy and the UK. I have been facilitating seminars and public events on 'visual Islam,' collaborating with the Diplomatic Institute of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and teaching both theory and practice of visual communication and visual representation of Islam: I have used all these occasions to test my perspectives across a wide range of audiences and specific cultural settings.

As explored above, I have evinced the established tendency and pronounced preference to deal with the visual at a mere informative level. This is particularly the case for

academia for which photography has been approached as mostly an illustrative tool for pre-defined verbal narratives.

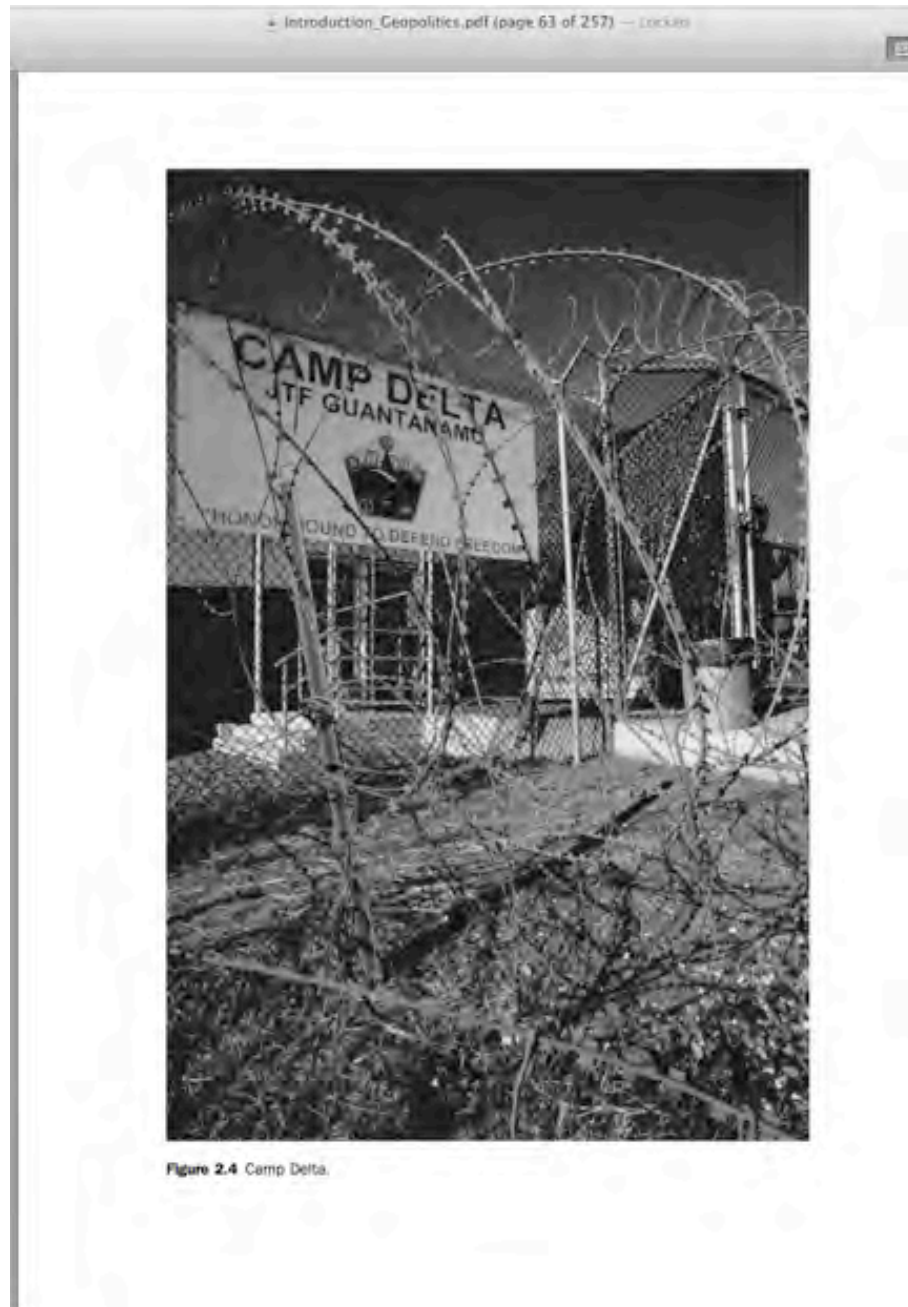


Figure 2.4 Camp Delta.

*Verbal and visual in mixed media in Flint 2006: 63.*

However, the same is equally true for the media world and its paradigm of the visual as a document. In such a context, the pipe is one with the represented pipe, and audiences

are expected to interpret it as such: the notion of the photograph as a sign (Hobbes) of the Real, and, hence, as forensics, remains largely mainstream and consistently used. Furthermore, regardless of any current trope, verbal texts still hierarchize mixed media dynamics, and inform the practice of seeing the pipe as a pipe with the extra layer of *saying* that it is indeed a pipe. As previously noted with Foucault's analysis (Foucault 1998), an order always rule mixed media forms, and I recognise the constant predominance of the verbal over the visual. Because of the plot form borrowed from the novel, I agree with Greenaway's acknowledgement of the extent to which cinema too is verbally led (Greenaway 2010): it follows that the title of the photoreportage establishes itself as a crucial signifying vector as it binds the representation to a specific interpretation and an overall policy of signification (Eco 1984a: 505-508).

David MacDougall has evinced the extent to which "anthropology's master concept, for all its distancing of itself from images, and in common with many other disciplines, has been the metaphor of *vision – understanding is seeing*" (MacDougall 1998: 267, emphasis in the original). Hence, if understanding is seeing, seeing is ontologically relevant, but diverse epistemologies promote a wide array of distinct and, sometimes, alternative ways of seeing (Berger 1972; Wells 2009): signs intend symbols and simulacra, and these dynamics consistently inform the signification of the Real and that of the representation.

As a consequence, the issue of identities, another crucial concern for the anthropological endeavour, remains equally pivotal. I have approached identities as communicative hubs, and suggested the temporariness and the fluidity of their formations, engagements and cognitive dynamics. This theoretical approach implicitly questions the terms of Said's Orientalism (Said 1978) as a comprehensive gaze (Lacan 1978) on the 'East:' if interpretations largely, or even wholly, depend on previous and hegemonic frames of signification, personal cognitive activities appear to be of little relevance.

I have recognised how the objectification of identities (Muslim / Christian / Man / Woman...) is truly functional to promote *fictionalised* outlooks. As a white, Christian male I am expected to fall within certain patterns of signification; however, my identity is that of a white Christian male who is about to turn 42 and has been travelling extensively the Muslim world for half of his life: these two considerations, among many other I could evoke, displace me from any pre-arranged or projected sociological outlook.

Concurrently, researched stories might be the 'inescapable' result of economic conditions and of 'invited' if not thoroughly 'expected' outlooks. Arguably, it takes a lot of courage to assess the Hawzas in very negative terms when your sponsor expects the opposite, and submitted findings might sometimes be the necessary results of their premise. Moving between the media and the academic word has further helped me to contextualise wider practices of signification and knowledge dissemination, and the extent to which 'simplification' might be the necessary step to make intelligible both news and research. Rather expectedly, processes of translation of the Real into the representation too fall into over-simplifying and truly projective patterns: it is undoubtedly pretentious to summarise in a few lines very complex dynamics, socio-cultural settings and economic patterns for an analysis that is far beyond the present context. Instead, I hope that a few examples from my photojournalistic career might suffice.

While working for *Il Gazzettino*, one of the five most important Italian dailies, I was summoned from the chief editor to discuss the funeral coverage for a suicide teenager in 2002. The chief editor's un-negotiable requirements were the following *simulacra*: the crying mother, the entry to the church with the coffin, and, if I managed to, a sober expression from the father. The journalist did not attend the event as he would not need to: the narrative, the story and the 'angle' were pre-arranged and the story already written in advance with the whole of its nuances, emotional baggage and a fully recognizable and

identifiable narrative. I did my job and the following morning I submitted my letter of resignation.

A few years later (2006) I travelled as a free-lancer to Afghanistan. In the month I spent there, I planned a series of stories to photograph, of which a few would be my own research, others specifically finalised for news feeds and magazine outputs. I was aware of the extent to which the identified partners I had in mind would require *their own angle*; as a free-lancer I was fully in charge of my work and 'free' to choose whether or not to comply with the press requirements. At the same time, the pressing need to sell in order to pay my mortgage rate would take away from me that 'freedom,' as another kind of constraint would be exercised upon me: I eventually shot a story on a couple of Italian military personnel who got married while doing their service time in Kabul and spent their honeymoon in separate tents. Despite being one of the most idiotic facts I ever covered as a photojournalist, it was the only story I managed to sell with the magazine not even haggling over the price I asked.

The third example I wish to briefly mention evokes my two-months in China in 2007. The Italian Institute for Culture in Bozen published a series of grants to research the Chinese traditions of Shanghai. I was awarded an assignment, which is a lump sum to complete a research topic: for this specific case I was not constrained by limitations and I could develop the subject as I liked. The results were highly appreciated as I did my research in a *truly free manner*. However, the latter frameset is rather unusual, and becoming increasingly so because of today's news media changing paradigms and shifted attention to gossip and tabloid issues.

My research on the Hawzas was pursued with full creative freedom, and my only limitations were those arranged by the Hawzas and not by my sponsoring partners.

However, being part of an academic framework, and Exeter is no different in such regards, produced a new set of limitations as universities are liable for their researchers' conduct. As a result, I was requested to *fictionalise* in advance how I planned to conduct my fieldwork and assure the University Body that I would not behave un-ethically nor exploit my research subject; on top of this, my application was further scrutinised as I engaged the topic 'Islam.'

It might appear that ethics has become central for knowledge production and distribution. This is not the case as both news media and university are interested in ethics only in so far as they are not called to Court to answer for any misconduct: for the University of Exeter ethics proved a concern as long as my research subject accepted in writing that they could be photographed. However, none of my research subjects would even consider signing something like that, and I had to come up with creative solutions instead. To the best of my knowledge, the case of 'exploited' research subjects taking academic researchers to Court is still unheard of, but it is not so with the news world for which law cases are increasingly frequent: Google being ordered to take down from YouTube *The Innocence of Muslims* video is just one remainder of the extent to which media production falls within larger socio-political issues (NBC 2014).

The polysemic condition of the image has been already widely researched (Barthes 1977; Barthes 2010), and I have explored the extent to which an image is never just a piece of information, but an explosion of contiguous, multiple and conflicting communication. In such a theoretical framework, established communicative models for which a pipe is a pipe might fail to address the extent to which an image might signify because of a unique *hic et nunc*, and personal and social conditions.

While I recognise the rich multiplicity of visual codes, I also acknowledge the extent to which

the interpreter would not be entitled to say that the message can mean everything. It can mean many things, but there are senses that would be preposterous to suggest. I do not think that there can be somebody eager to say that [a basket full of figs] means that Napoleon died in May 1821 (Eco 1990: 5-6).

Therefore, whether images *generate* or *create* their significations critically question modes of knowledge production and, now more than ever, distribution: this remains dramatically central to communication of the Muslim world.

### ***Traumatized Islam***

I chose to only tangentially approach processes of media engagement and extensive focus groups to leave the issue to the expanding sociological research on the subject 'Islam' (among many: Poole 2002). This has been motivated both upon my theoretical framework and the extremely poor feedback I received from the Hawzas. Among the very few occasions in which I successfully stimulated a discussion, I will mention when I convinced Ali-Reza to comment my finalised Syrian photo essay at the hawza Al-Qaim of Damascus: he calmly looked at all pictures and, pointing at Sheikh Nabil Halbawi, asked me why I would include a "failed" portrait into my gallery (Ali-Reza 2010).





*fusari\_hawza\_syria\_020. Post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

I showed the same gallery to Hassan and he focused solely on his absence from the photo essay. I further interrogated him on how faithful to the Real he would perceive my work and he suggested to prepare “more captions to explain what the photographs *showed*” (Hassan 2010b).

Sheikh Jafar at the hawza Al-Qaim of Manama was interested in his portrait as an heir to the *isnad* of the ‘*alim*. When I solicited him to comment on the finalised Bahraini photo essay, he added how “life at the Hawza had been fully and consciously portrayed and [he] learnt something new about the place [he] was living in” (Sheikh Jafar 2010).

The three cases above are the only interviews I managed to conduct with the Hawzas’ participants as all invited members would kindly turn me down, either because of their disinterest to my research or, possibly, to avoid any explicit involvement. I eventually interrogated Sheikh Hassan in Exeter and discussed with him the issue; as a former student of the Al-Qaim network, he would be in a privileged position to assess the impact

of my work for practices of representation of the Muslim world. He granted me his full approval and argued the extent to which my representation of the Hawza was “faithful” and “ethical” (Sheikh Hassan 2013). However, his in-between position across both ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ academia indirectly reinforced a feeling of alienation from the Hawzas: the many rejections I collected over more than two years of request for research fully convinced me of the extent to which the Hawzas were not interested in my work, either by being represented or being represented by a non-Muslim.

In the tradition of photojournalism and anthropology, my aim of researching the Hawzas is one of political commitment. By clearly stating who *I* am, and who *they* are, I have been negotiating and promoting shared, if not hybrid, spaces of engagement. In a negotiation, there is no chance of success if the bargaining parties are not clearly defined so; arguably, there might be no need for negotiating when the two parties are too close (Fischer and Ury 1999). I have repeatedly supported the necessity for non-Muslim researchers to engage in anthropological research in the Muslim world and, alongside that, for the Muslim counterpart to respond. I am aware of how this is dismissive of my previous notion of agencies as communicative hubs but, for the present context, I will use clear-cut identities as more functional to contextualise the public dimension of my research.

It can be argued that traumas might be healed into their ‘linear’ dimension by bringing identities into a shared space of confrontation and political negotiation: by recognising where *you* stand and where *I* stand, my representation would have incorporated different and even competing voices which together would have signified the Real and the representation. While I would have maintained a leading role for the signification of the Real, the Hawzas could have contributed greatly to the vertical signifying of my Meta-Images: ‘our’ finished research would have promoted truly dialogical processes of

representation, and offered a concrete example of identities discussing a shared space of signification.

In such a context, my identity 'tag' as a non-Muslim would have somehow legitimised our shared endeavour to a 'Western' audience: joined signification practices of two distinct backgrounds, mine and that of the Hawzas, would have overcome any legitimate doubt about religious or ideological affiliations. I assess this of primary political relevance in today's multimedia cultures and globalised societies: Islam is experiencing traumatic and conflictual significations and, in my opinion, is in no position to remain 'outside' global communicative dynamics, nor rely on self-representations. The framework of the Meta-Image might pursue these inclusive policies as 'Orientalist' interpretations are generated and expected, but equally created. The contrary remains true as well: this is the reason why I have promoted the central relevance of phenomenological frameworks for the relation between images and communication.

In such a context, the expanding possibilities offered by the Web 2.0 digital revolution should be appreciated as the most effective element to participate in a new thread of research. Even though it might seemingly require more resources and hence be truly unrealistic in times of economic recession and decreasing academic budgets, Web 2.0 formats might positively impact academia as they did for the creative industries: production costs have been dramatically reduced and interactive platforms are being offered without any increase in budgetary requirements. Furthermore, the range of opportunities currently available improves on a daily base and continuously offers new and refined tools to any interested stakeholder.

In such an evolving framework, I appreciate the extent to which the digital component of today's communication is thoroughly re-arranging both epistemological and ontological concerns for all academic fields of research for which images

are active players in the game of establishing and changing values. They are capable of introducing new values into the world and thus of threatening old ones [...] totemism allows the image to assume a social, conversational and dialectical relationship with the beholder (Mitchell 2005b: 105-106).

In such a context, Edkins' references to "linear time" and "trauma time" suggests a tactical framework to explore how hegemonic notions might impact post-9/11 collective gazes. If traumas "are events that are incapable of, or at the very least resist, narration or integration into linear narratives" (Edkins 2012: 7), they arguably inform visual representations with their sensorial dimension. As much as academics dealing with the Muslim world might be influenced by emotive responses to a limited extent, the same might not be the case across concurrent, diverse or uninformed audiences: because of the over-reaching and implicit quality of sensorial engagements, emotions might lead to reinforce previous hegemonic and 'traumatic' significations.

All research on Orientalism converges on the central relevance that media have for cultural transmissions: across all of these theoretical frameworks, media has been contextualised as thoroughly consistent, contiguous and ideologically conformed by hegemonic political perspectives. Said identifies the centrality of the US relationship with Israel (Said 1978; Said 1992; Said 1997) as the founding issue of modern Orientalism, and his arguments might be truer now than ever; however, because of the changes of the current news and media markets, I am inclined to re-assess the importance of other reasons too.

First of all, the news market is not as consistent and contiguous as it used to be. Instead, it can be argued that media and politics might have become antagonistic to each other: I do not suggest the re-evaluation of news media as a watchdog to Power but rather signal the bulimic dimension of current processes of media production and distribution. The requirement to be on air on a continuous 24/7 rota has led media to *create* the events rather than simply report them (among many, Arno 2009). If politics fails to provide enough material, media will *have to* make them (Madinelli 2013): as the saying goes, isn't strange that everyday enough things happen to precisely fill up a newspaper?

At the same time, all media outlets have their own distinct policies of representation and pursue their own ideologies. As much as they might create facts when none is available, they are also reluctant to simply report. On several occasions Campbell has argued that the desire to dictate the New Labour's political agenda to the media would backfire in a rather critical stance towards its promoted activities (Campbell A. 2013): media needs to be fed, and fed continuously, but with the kind of food each of them wishes to eat.

In such a context, I have witnessed as a media producer the extent to which localised dynamics signify world events upon different political concerns. My notes are mainly, but not solely, derived from previous collaborations in the Italian media market: it is my firm opinion that the national scenario has been very limitedly affected by Mr Berlusconi's political activities as it was already shaped by previous political affiliations and a reduced concern for investigative journalism overall. As a result, Italian media have not enjoyed any golden age of investigative journalism and this still affects the very low ranking Italy has in the Freedom of Press Index (Freedom-Of-Press 2013). Within the specific Italian media market, Orientalist significations might be the direct result of personal political sensitivities rather than wider established hegemonic frameworks. At the same time, I am aware of the extent to which overwhelming generalisations might wrongly inform localised

dynamics and media markets even in the presence of rather consolidated trends. Hence, I distinguish the Orientalist impact on media not only across different media outlets but because of specific media strategies too. In other words, the reasons motivating coverage at the *Times* are rather different from those at the *Guardian* (Poole 2002: 238-239): together they articulate a (visual) media scenario radically different from that of Germany, France or Italy. This is the reason why I ultimately suggest to contextualise local media dynamics by reference to geographical concerns as much as to wider media politics and policies of multimedia and mixed media significations.

### ***Expanding Frameworks Of Representations***

While the Orientalist critique offers valid tools for analytical research, so the increasing complexities of the current media market should be approached with more attentive generalisations. The media landscape has evolved from the 1970s-1990s paradigm (Tunstall 1977) and fragmented into a variety of localised dynamics, regional patterns and media trends: the Internet, the Web 2.0 and the mobile revolution have largely rearticulated socio-cultural forms and suggested more overlapping and integrated approaches. In such a lively space of engagement, specific rationales might motivate very differently the same representation of *mullahs*, terrorists or veiled women: ultimately, the visual hegemony of these images might be assessed not only against 'Western' imageries and social agenda but because of the concurrent lack of alternative 'native' offer.

In his last interview, Said acknowledges with profound despair the state of totalising power of the media scenario he was in (Said 2003). In the early years of the twenty-first century media had conglomerated and formed gigantic semantic structures such as, for instance, Time Warner. In those years, the Internet was still a mere news distributor rather than a 2.0 producer, and could be correctly assessed as contiguous to mainstream media with no

grass roots or bottom-up dynamics. Because of this scenario, Said argues the impossibility of articulating any alternative to established news feed formats: the cascade system from the centre of the empire to its farthest hinterlands would disseminate the same unique perspective in which Power would be total knowledge and Knowledge total power.

Nowadays, the media landscape has thoroughly changed as media are no longer American (Tunstall 2007). Satellite media, the Internet and Web 2.0 formats are challenging any US media supremacy alongside the work of conglomerates such as Al-Jazeera and, to a lesser extent, Al-Arabiya. The media ban Al-Jazeera suffers in the US is particularly revealing of the challenge old and media outlets present: the resulting landscape covers 'Islam' with a multitude of diverse political agendas, (counter)-media institutions and coordinated communication spanning from the Web to satellite channels.

Today's audiences enjoy a larger range of opportunities to participate in mainstream significations, and embrace grass roots and alternative perspectives. Upon the radical changes brought about by the Web 2.0 revolution it could be argued that each and every political agency has now ways to make her voice loud and clear within the international arena. In such a scenario, if I were a member of Hamas, I would regularly invite photographers, and offer them the possibility to experience the extent to which the Real is different from my representation: Hamas, Hezbollah or any other 'rogue' political actor has the tools to spin hegemonic significations by investing time and attention for media engagement.

In such a battle to frame social imageries, visual media can be crucially effective: the mobile revolution might use Web 2.0 forms to direct the 'media-circus' (*nomen omen*) rather than being directed by it. The great availability of freelancing photojournalists willing

to work in exchange for their expenses, and eager to get the scoop of their lives would further provide an abundance of willing candidates. The extremely beneficial cost-result ratio of such a participatory attitude does not require the large investments that were needed at the time of Said's last interview: now it is fully possible to culturally and politically challenge established representations with an extremely low budget and very little IT knowledge.

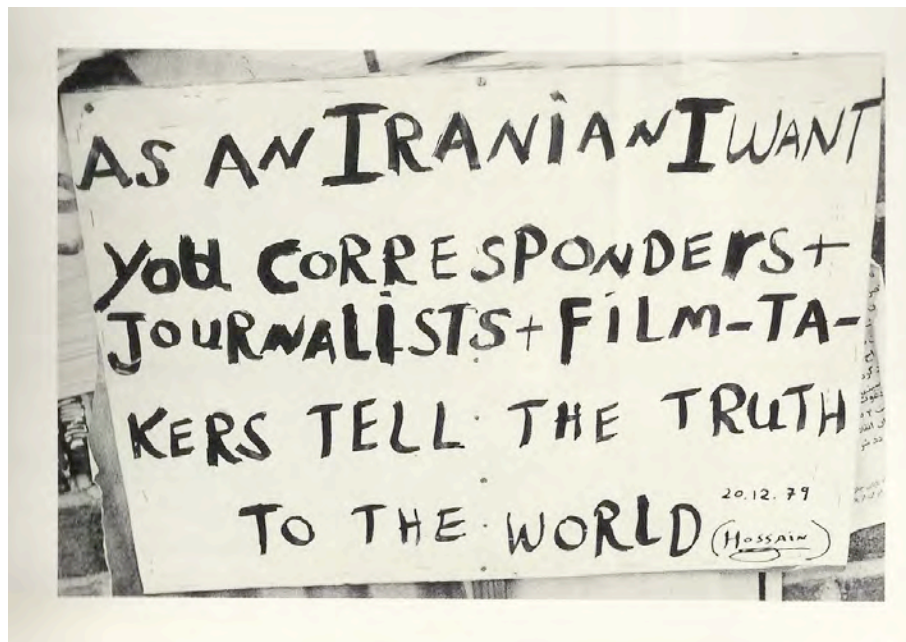
Digital and multimedia communication reach the whole world and, most importantly, impact both grass roots movements and mainstream media. Blogs have already proven their capital relevance within localised politics, and, when published in English, they have become crucially influential among 'Western' media producers (among many: Ghonim 2012). Today's 'Muslim' and Arab media aspire to represent their own stories as they have the tools to disseminate their communication as intended; for instance, the tactical usage of the current media landscape has made possible for Al-Qaida to publish an English version of its online magazine.

In such a fought-for public field, 'native' media can advocate, inform on and influence social and personal significations while promoting specifically targeted communicative agendas. Since my 1994 trip to Baghdad I have been experiencing the extent to which the Muslim world wishes to be understood, and such a pattern encompasses an unexpected number of conservative and religious figures, as well as more liberal segments: my fear is that they might have chosen the wrong media and preferred the verbal to the visual.

Innovative policies of engagement such as the case of Facebook's multimedia and interactive anti-war campaign connecting Israeli and Iranian citizens (Dehghan 2012) remain largely un-heard of and thoroughly under-used. I understand the risk of giving mainstream media a cultural and political product fitting pre-arranged narratives, but I



remain optimistic about the increasing media awareness of larger segments of the world population, particularly among the so-called digital natives. Several examples spanning both before and after the digital revolution have already attested to it. Among many, the way the Muslim Brotherhood engaged foreign media both before and after Mubarak's fall reminds me of the early media management of the Iranian revolution: by being constantly inclusive and proactive, media outlets are *the* pivotal asset for any political process, and might foster crucial advancements both at a grass roots level and among more sympathetic mainstream media.



*A sign in Tehran at the time of the Islamic revolution in Peress 1983: 3.*

Hence, even the usual trope of the 'youngsters using new social media and being truly Westernised' can be eventually spun towards alternative significations of current affairs: this is the reason why any disinterest in engaging no longer provides an excuse for being misinterpreted or misrepresented within the new social media landscape.

Over the last few years, digital cultures have enlarged their niche dimension to enjoy a pivotal centrality both in terms of socio-political and economic relevance. In mid 2011 Amazon recognised that “less than four years after introducing Kindle books, Amazon.com customers are now purchasing more Kindle books than all print books – hardcover and paperback – combined” (Amazon 2011). However, e-books are not the only space for socio-political and cultural dissemination; the above mentioned ‘enhanced e-books’ arguably represent the heir of the first online format in cultural engagement I track back to Peress and Ritchin’s project on Bosnia. Their 1996 multimedia experiment relied on the simple structures the Internet could then provide: nevertheless, its basic HTML language promoted a thoroughly interrogative dimension to which audio, visual and textual materials all contributed. The antecedents of the blog, that is, the discussion boards, further offered a very tentatively arranged social space to host a debate between *all* fighting parties.

Following this first experiment, the digital has continuously supported new collaborative forms and innovated formats of distribution: some of the latest examples of iPad multimedia narratives seem to have finally set the path for multi-audience forms of engagement (Anderson 2011; Van Lohuizen 2012). At the same time, crowdsourcing platforms such as *emphas.is*, offer, maybe for the first time, a possibility for authors to conduct their project in a truly independent way, thus opening up a space for experimental collaborations across online features and offline structures. Quite relevantly, the digital seems to be influencing and innovating TV formats too, as the very fortunate example of Kevin Spacey’s *House of Cards* might suggest: out of a previous 1990s BBC TV series, Spacey produced a thoroughly different narrative improving the quality of the characters for its adaptation in Washington. However, these remain details of little relevance as they are common to production dynamics; instead, its production by an online company for an online distributor led to the posting of the whole series of 13 1-hour episodes

simultaneously to experiment new marketing possibilities: as Spacey has argued in an array of *fora*, this is a way to adapt the liberating possibilities of the Web to innovate both knowledge production and distribution dynamics (Spacey 2013).

New formats of representation continuously evolve and promote innovative and more challenging practices of engagement. Peress and Ritchin's *New York Times* project has evolved alongside Internet penetration rates and its increased simplicity of use to arrange interactive forms, and both personalise and refine intended communication: besides the application Klynt, there are other platforms which are equally easy to use and fully free, such as Zeega and Mozilla Popcorn (among many: 94 Elements 2014; Elgersma 2014; and Harris 2014). Once more, for a very large part of the world population, there is no excuse for not participating or contributing to communicative and political processes. In such a social context, the opportunity to heal the trauma of 9/11 is at our fingertips but it requires a conscious choice to engage and negotiate identities and social practices: disinterest, mistrust or fear, though understandable, needs to be overcome on both sides of the dialogical space.

In spite of the initial suspicions my project raised across all Hawzas, I have endlessly pursued an inclusive relationship to promote trust and a strong engaging and participatory approach: the mistrust I suffered in return was finally confirmed when no Hawza member attended any of my exhibition openings. Certainly, the Hawzas in Syria and Bahrain would not be able to come as both countries were in the midst of civil unrest. However, the London-based ones were in a very different situation, and could have engaged in a dialogue with the British Academy especially as they were striving to be recognised as educational institutions: I felt profoundly troubled by the degree of suspicion and rejection the UK-based Hawzas eventually reiterated as they chose a more comfortable, very low, if not invisible, public profile. This reverberated intensively against all of my audience

response sessions which welcomed my Hawza reportages in very positive terms; the interviews I conducted and the comments on the exhibition's guestbooks have consistently confirmed any previous appreciation among uninformed and academic audiences alike.

The two pieces of fieldwork completed and the many proposals for collaboration rejected have brought me to further question whether there is any reluctance in some Muslim communities to engage and be represented. This is not the way to address the supposed iconophobic attitude so established in Muslim societies, nor project any (comprehensive) alternative gaze on *them* as a clearly defined sociological entity. Instead, herein lies the pivotal issue pending at the end of my research: is it possible to avoid engagement with the media world? How over-encompassing is the world of communication and its defining elements? How would be possible to manage power relations and structures as constitutive of processes of identity negotiation across 'non-Muslim' and 'Muslim' communities in the UK? How profound is the suspicion of engaging, and, with that, debate new forms of identity as a consequence to globalization and post-9/11 scenarios? Eventually, how could *I*, as a not-Muslim, engage the Hawzas?

### ***Public Cultures 2.0***

The photograph has been identified as a space of conflictual negotiation of significations instead of a consistent carrier of the 'message' for which the (represented) pipe is the (real) pipe. Concurrently, the inescapable trope of the visual turn has been rearranged within the terms of mixed media cultural societies. The Meta-Image has been juxtaposed to the Hyperphotograph to finally evince the extent to which the Real might not be any longer approachable in terms of Platonic categories. The simulative and symbolic have been finally assessed as two value-free policies of intended signification for a cultural world embracing the 'digital' paradigm more consistently every day so: arguably, each

person in the world has a mobile phone and, most probably, each set has included a camera. We all have been turned into digital photographer, with little or no understanding of what visual cultures mean but with the extremely fallacious perspective of its immediacy and ease. The visual is by large believed to be a 'natural' medium, and the result of the out-dated simulacrum of the pipe being the pipe. In the quickly evolving scenario of today's digital cultures, Orientalist gazes confront the 'traumatic' quality of communication of Islam, and globalization is 'mashing up' identities to the point of questioning long acquired notions of gender (see above).

The Meta-Image has been here suggested as a tool and a perspective, i.e. a paradigm, to deal with the increasing complexities of today's world. More specifically, it has been fostered as a new form of knowledge production and distribution supporting a new format, that of Public Cultures 2.0: Aranda's photograph of the Pieta epitomise the extent to which storytelling practice would benefit from interactive, multi-layered and audience-led formats in knowledge production and dissemination.

As I pointed out in my introduction, even though it might be one of the most represented subjects, Islam still rests precariously between issues of Orientalism, over-simplified generalisations, and over-indulgent self-representations. I have previously identified in the Meta-Image a tool and an epistemology to address the increasing complexities of the digital photograph; I have used my temporary assessment of photography as 'semantics without ontology' to inscribe the signification of the Real and of the representation within the framework of the un-defined and the un-finished; I articulated my fluid and dynamic model through the theoretical assessment of my practice as a professional photojournalist and media practitioner: upon a very operative pivot I finally reaffirm the need for renewed forms of collaboration between academia and the creative industries. My Public Cultures

2.0 format identifies the extent to which these two spaces of knowledge production and dissemination might capitalise on the public quality of today's digital cultures.

Because of my focus on the human, and more specifically, on the 'Other,' I have identified in anthropology a very contrasted, but still very lively and valid, space of engagement. In a wholly consistent manner, I have preferred cultural mashup and remix practices (Borschke 2012; Ferguson 2012) as epistemological metaphors for my phenomenological framework: all these elements converge to question *all* identities at play and, with that, explicitly promote new forms of engagement.

As a consequence, the 2.0 dialogical component is not an excuse for indulging in social media platforms. Instead, it is aimed to re-appropriate the disruptive power of the Internet, and channel it towards more socially relevant concerns: by doing so, it implicitly reconnects to much of the latest research on the so-called public anthropology. With reference to the latter research field, Borofsky has consistently championed a public stance for anthropology (Borofsky 2001; Borofsky 2011) as a way to widen anthropologists' limited agency in current cultural affairs. By acknowledging the extent to which the public stance in the human sciences has gradually faded out, he suggests

public anthropology [to engage] issues and audiences beyond today's self-imposed disciplinary boundaries. The focus is on conversations with broad audiences about broad concerns [...] The hope is [...] invigorating *public conversations with* anthropological insights (Borofsky 2001, emphasis added).

Though different theorists tend to direct their attention towards different aspects of media research, there is much convergence towards the increasing relevance gained by visual cultures.

Mitchell warns about the fallacy of such a trope, and instead suggests how

we do not live in a uniquely visual era. The 'visual' or 'pictorial turn' is a recurrent trope that displaces moral and political panic onto images and so-called visual media. Images are convenient scapegoats (Mitchell 2005b: 343).

It is within the terms of what Ostor has detailed as the “flowering of diverse approaches in the garden of visual anthropology, fulfilling the promise of an anthropology entirely through visual means” (Ostor 2012) that I have argued the unparalleled possibilities of the digital medium. In today’s rapidly evolving social cultures, “public anthropology constitutes an effort to connect with those who, while embracing an anthropological *perspective*, feel alienated from anthropologists and their writings” (Borofsky 2001, emphasis added). While the distinct sub-disciplines of anthropology might be constrained by their disciplinary frameworks or limited by their chosen medium of research, visual or verbal focus or social form of engagement, public anthropology offers as an operative tactic for a comprehensive communicative strategy.

The terms of the paradigm Public Cultures 2.0 should have been finally clarified by reference to the debate on public anthropology. I aim to explicitly reconnect to the appreciation of anthropology as a perspective and a field for personal and social engagements: this is clearly directed to explore and research cultural fragments of current societies, and both question and contextualise the signification of the Real and of the representation. The ‘Other’ is no more the traditional simulacrum of the ‘primitive’ or the ‘good savage:’ instead, it is always and continuously *us*, i.e. everyone both in front and behind the camera. Hence, my two-fold ethnographic perspective.

In such a context, I finally motivate my preference for ‘Public Cultures’ over a possible ‘Public Anthropology:’ the anthropological perspectives I wish to connect to remain largely

minor, and this applies both to the centrality of the visual within mixed media dynamics, and to the public as a fundamental communicative concern. Rather than continuously renegotiating anthropology's established heritage and current major trends, I have preferred the notion of 'culture' to acknowledge the epistemological shift brought about by media and cultural studies' research. By arguing how cultures explicitly recognise the extent to which identities are thoroughly contiguous to personal and social spaces of engagement, I assess that there is no virtual or real, no 'Second Life' to juxtapose the any first one, but a unique shared space across which communicative hubs endlessly 'are.'

In the end, I call for a new contextualization of ethnographic subjects and media forms upon the distinct qualities of today's digital cultures. In such a framework, the 2.0 dimension has expanded my paradigm's terms of reference through the features of the unresolved, un-finished and un-limited: the model of the rhizome access communicative hubs upon their temporary *state* as determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions. More technically, Public Cultures 2.0 aims to use the informative and communicative features of the Meta-Image as its semantic pivot. It builds multimedia and interactive platforms by relying on the digital image as both a stand-alone (the Meta-Image) and sequenced (the montage) representative form: it further relies on an un-assertive and interrogative stance to facilitate audience-led policies of engagement for which the website producer maintains a privileged *but not unique* voice exactly like it happens within 2.0 paradigms. What I envisage here has not a predefined format or a fixed static model as it is solely determined upon its epistemological perspective. By pinpointing the aesthetic layers constituting the processes of signification of both the Real and the representation, it eventually suggests a new idea of genius and creativity. With that, I call for an alternative attitude to the largely established romantic idea of the work of art as autonomous, and of the artist as a genius: by questioning both identities and production dynamics, I largely identify creativity with



post-production practice. As the case of the 2008 Obama poster has suggested (Bearman 2008), the signification of the Real is as complex as multifaceted, and to unambiguously disentangle independent authorships has become rather questionable. Mashup forms and digital remix embrace both personal and social creation, and their un-fictional quality further complicate assessments. By recognising the extent to which cognitive processes are both temporary and phenomenologically determined, I call for the use of aesthetics as semantics as that which joins together form and content for an intended outcome. In such a context, post-production tactics become *the* strategy to pursue significations consistently: because of this, I aim to support academic research with the pivotal contribution of the creative industries, and promote the Internet as the tactical medium to articulate public communication.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

As I have discussed above, I was not able to pursue my research as initially planned. The unforeseen obstacles I encountered led me to theoretically analyse rather than produce a visible example of my Public Cultures 2.0 framework. Since “a picture cannot depict its pictorial form; it displays it” (Wittgenstein 2001: 2172), the production of a Public Cultures 2.0 format would have required the collaborative stance and resources I did not have for the present case study: this explicitly epitomises the most problematic feature of my research proposal.

I recognise the liberty which participating agencies have to determine the quality of their engagement but, at the same time, realise the dramatic necessity for the Muslim world to engage the public arena in a dialogical manner. I have argued the extent to which multimedia is today’s opportunity to re-assess the socio-political relevance and public impact of research, particularly in anthropological contexts: the contribution which

academia and the creative industries can jointly bring about should be wholly embraced through new and experimental forms of collaboration.

The Shi'a seminaries might appear to a wider audience an issue of very limited socio-political relevance; this is not the case as their theological relevance, if declining, is still pivotal to the wider Muslim world. Public Cultures 2.0 is both a tactical stance and a comprehensive strategic project: in such a context, multimedia is the vector capable of expanding the space of social engagement both quantitatively and qualitatively. Public Cultures 2.0 cross-media capabilities equally originate and promote new opportunities for public consumption though the current Internet's mobile booming; in frenzy contexts of signification, aesthetics might function as a tool to captivate general audiences and anchor them to explore, investigate, question and, *only then*, signify: which of the two following photographs might be expected to engage audiences more? And upon what criteria?



*Occupy Gezi, © Daniel Etter, Istanbul, Turkey. June 1, 2013. Source:*

*<http://timelightbox.tumblr.com/post/68830759077/photograph-by-daniel-etter-istanbul-turkey/>.*



*Occupy Gezi, © Daniel Etter, Istanbul, Turkey. June 1, 2013. Source:*

*<http://timelightbox.tumblr.com/post/68830759077/photograph-by-daniel-etter-istanbul-turkey/>.*

Concurrently, multimedia formats might represent the “appreciation of the post-modern concern for the constructions of knowledge and how truth is negotiated through public discussions” (Borofsky 2001): blogs and wiki-based projects have been evoked as obvious examples. Because of these dynamics, multimedia becomes a new opportunity to reconsider audiences not as passive subjects to educate or fill with pre-arranged sets of meanings, but as responsive and interactive ‘2.0’ communicative hubs.

The multimedia producer of a Public Cultures 2.0 project arranges and edits a signification of the Real for her audiences to question, respond to and engage with. Because of the ontological flexibility of the model, cultural projects might be approached through a wide variety of comprehensive strategies: by incorporating ‘native’ voices, a Public Cultures 2.0 producer contextualises and challenges established and hegemonic social dynamics while allowing minority perspectives to participate in the debate. I remain aware of the

difficulties and perils of multimedia and Internet-based communication: audiences are not necessarily engaging either online or offline.

The juxtaposition between Clay Shirky and Evgeny Morozov might be very artificial but effective in finally addressing the two poles of the current debate on the Internet: Clay is the committed supporter of the unquestionable progresses the Web is promoting (Shirky 2010) whereas Evgeny focuses on the immense dangers its engagement brings (Morozov 2011). I believe the truth to be somewhere between the two poles, negotiated across a wide array of different possibilities; I am convinced that either the visual nor any form of mixed media or multimedia is inherently positive or negative, but their usage surely is. My theoretical analysis and practical engagement has constantly recognised the extent to which media are an extension of man as they signify *hic et nunc* with the subject's temporary being 'in-the-world.' I consistently engaged my identified policies of signification, the symbol and the simulacrum, in a value-free manner. Ultimately, the success of any space of engagement largely depends on the strategy chosen and the specific tactics the editor-producer (Bourriaud 2002) puts in place to reach her aims. Such an un-finished perspective is what fosters a new way to hybridise theoretical perspectives with practical concerns and finalise new opportunities for public engagement: the truth is not out there, but surely are the possibilities to more attentively representing and effectively signifying today's cultural systems.

Because of these dynamics I posited the relevance of visual communication within much wider semantic spaces to suggest a complementary perspective for its management. I concurrently discovered that processes of visual communication might be the results of highly personal concerns rather than of the semantic space within the frame: this is particularly valid for 'traumatic' subjects such as Islam. As a result, the Hawzas have contributed to evolve my theoretical outlook to encompass a more articulated outlook on

visual-led multimedia and multi-audience digital communication. I remain aware of how my years of research might quickly be out-dated because of the speed of today's evolving digital and media-led cultures. However, I am confident that the concerns I raised will continue to be relevant and my work will participate to future epistemological remixes (Ferguson 2011; Schlagel 2012).

As for myself, I have already began re-assessing the evolving possibilities of new media tools as I added a Canon 5D mark2 to my Canon 5D: as I touched above, the new model offers a new range of enhancing aesthetic and semantic features for visual communication, and I have been discovering its new functionalities for an AHRC-funded project at the University of Durham. In such a manner, I have been testing my paradigms of the Meta-Image and of Public Cultures 2.0 for a new and revised way to research the tentmakers of Islamic Cairo. Overall, the new camera has enhanced my practice of signification of the Real, and I feel my notion of aesthetics to have been confirmed as the aware and finalised management of a medium communicative features. As long as the re-appraisal of digital media communicative possibilities is consistently addressed as part of comprehensive frameworks of both theoretical and practical issues, then theoretical assessments of practice and practical engagement of theoretical models will preserve their ontological flexibility and generative un-completeness: as a result, paradigms such as my Meta-Image and Public Cultures 2.0 will maintain a critical relevance in spite of their being out-dated by the medium frenetic developments.

In a similar manner, the possibility for orientalising each and every research subject might be re-absorbed within a diverse outlook on identity and agencies: the Hawzas have been 'orientalised' both from a 'Western' and 'Eastern' perspectives as epitomised by the above gazes on colour and black and white representations. In such a context, the possibility to use formats such as my Meta-Image to transform the digital photograph into a multimedia

and multi-audience space for discussion and mutual discovery might re-affirm its enduring validity. By accepting a two-fold role as both producer and communicative facilitator, I recognise that the notion of identity might evolve from the

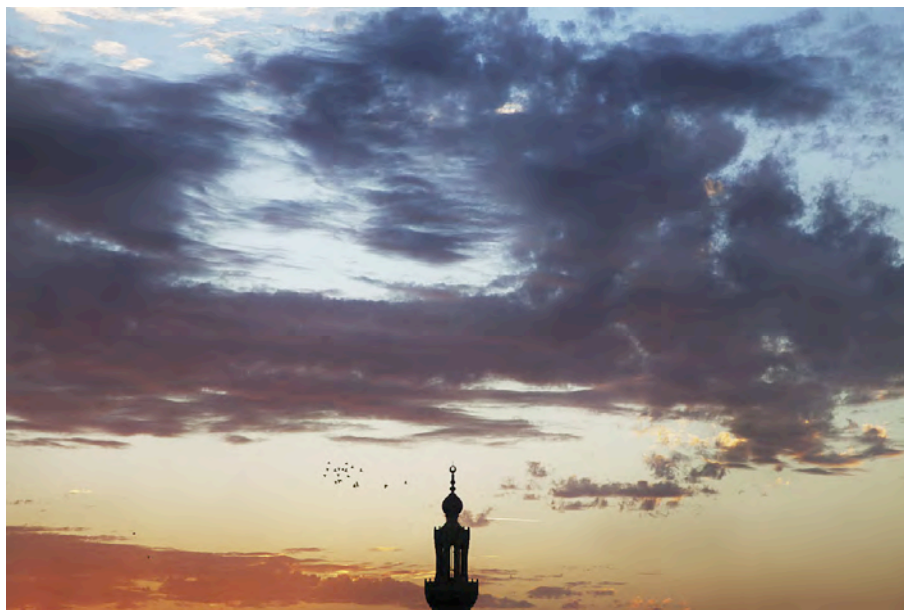
boring subject [and] narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum-beating nationalism and so on [...] into something different (Said 1998: 5).

Said's rejection of a flat and single-minded approach to the complexities of today's cultural words and his appreciation of the "prismatic quality of one's writing" have been here translated into the prismatic quality of one's multiple identities as portrayed through the prismatic quality of one's own visual production. Said concludes his piece by reference to the "irreconcilability of the various conflicting, or at least incompletely harmonised, aspects of what, cumulatively, I appear to have stood for" (Said 1998: 6). I fear that his encompassing attitude might be still dramatically minority, and that visual archives might too easily over-simplified and overall misunderstood.

It recently forwarded my photoreportage on the tentmakers to a London-based photographic critic who commented "lovely photographs, but I'll have to get my Egyptian friends to comment on them as it's difficult to discern orientalism from more legitimate interest" (Critic 2014). I remained puzzled of how a photographic critic might discriminate because of ethnic provenance: in fact, to what extent are *their* eyes more valid than mine? How might *their* ethnical background provide *them* with a privileged entry point to analysis of the Egyptian cultural context? What if *they* belonged to the wealthy and fully Westernized elites who had never come to that area, not knew anything about it? Would *they* not 'Orientalize' it in a different manner? What if, again, *they* despised that cultural part of Cairo as I found many of the Westernized elites do? Eventually, would she ask an

Egyptian to ‘validate’ a verbal narrative too or would the visual medium only deserve such treatment?

At the same time issues of Orientalism might impinge Arab or Muslim based in the West too, and have them project what does not belong to the frame. The case of the following image made me ponder on the over-encompassing dimension of projections as Revealing Indexes on complex identities.



*mafu\_20131122\_0237 Un-post-produced photograph © Massimiliano Fusari/massimedia.com.*

This image was rejected by a pool of scholars upon the final judgment of the only Arab in the group: he declared that the image was “dangerous” as it clearly represented a sunset, and *hence* a decaying symbol (Arab 2014). Unfortunately the image was shot at dawn, but, more importantly, it is impossible to identify the time of the day upon either the recording perspective or the light temperature. In this context, I wonder how I could manage (un-expected) projections and narratives within academic frameworks debating Islam: the axe of Orientalism might in fact strike in un-expected directions. How, for

instance, progress from the photograph as a sign of one's own projection to the creation of a space of mutual confrontation and reciprocal dialogue? How to add layers of information to the communicative power of the digital file? Eventually, how is it possible to engage audiences in an open manner to have them leave the discussion with an outlook different from the one they brought into?

The Cairo project I am working on wishes to build on the theoretical questions of my PhD research to test the temporary and un-finished patterns of the digital photograph *in practice*. In my next project I hope to come back to research the Hawzas to assess the enhancing contribution my formats of the Meta-Image and of Public Cultures 2.0 might bring about: my medium to longer commitment is to continue working at the intersection between academia and the creative industries to advance mutual exchanges between the two fields of research.



## **[Chapter Six] Annexes And Bibliography**

## **[CHAPTER SIX]**

### **ANNEX 01 - THE SYRIAN REPORTAGE**

















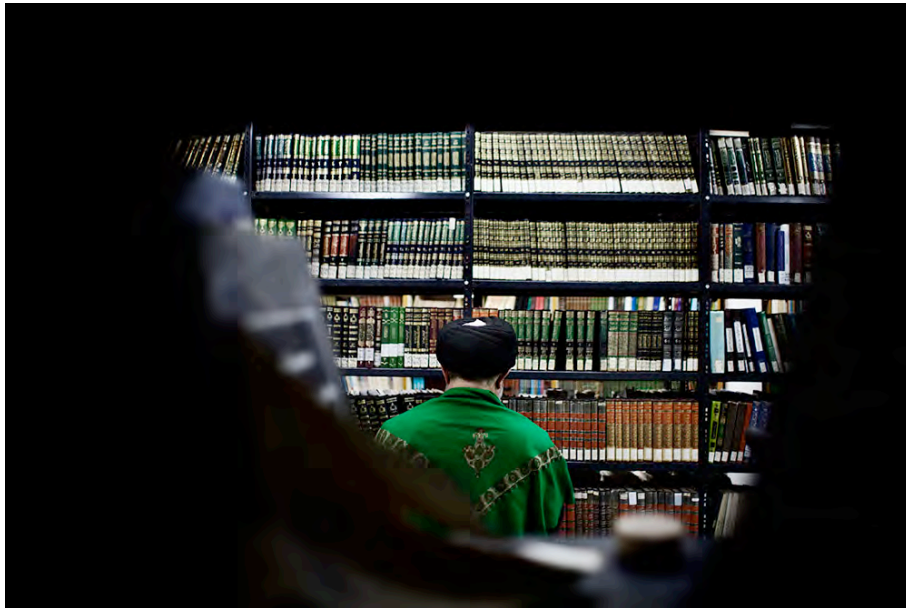


































## **[CHAPTER SIX]**

### **ANNEX 02 - THE BAHRAINI REPORTAGE**



































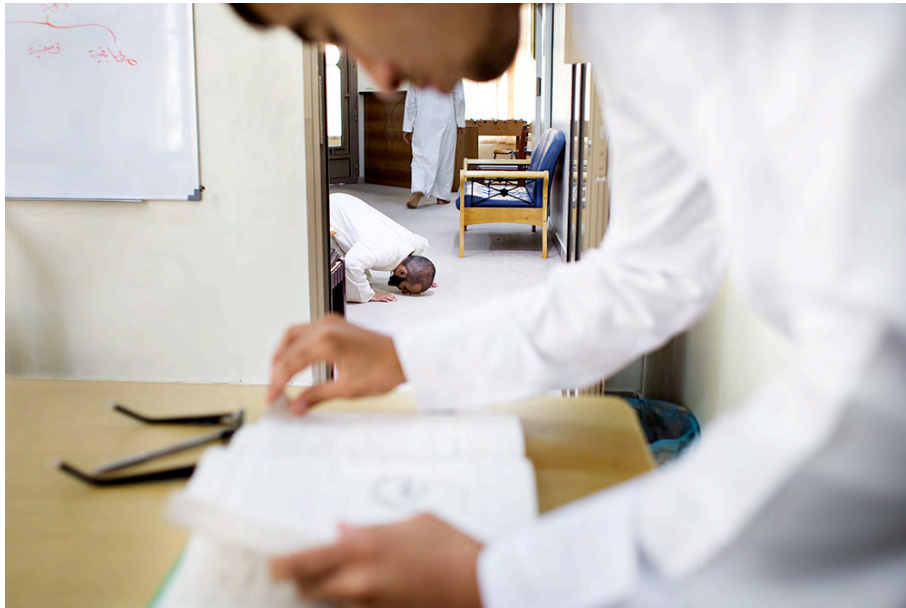












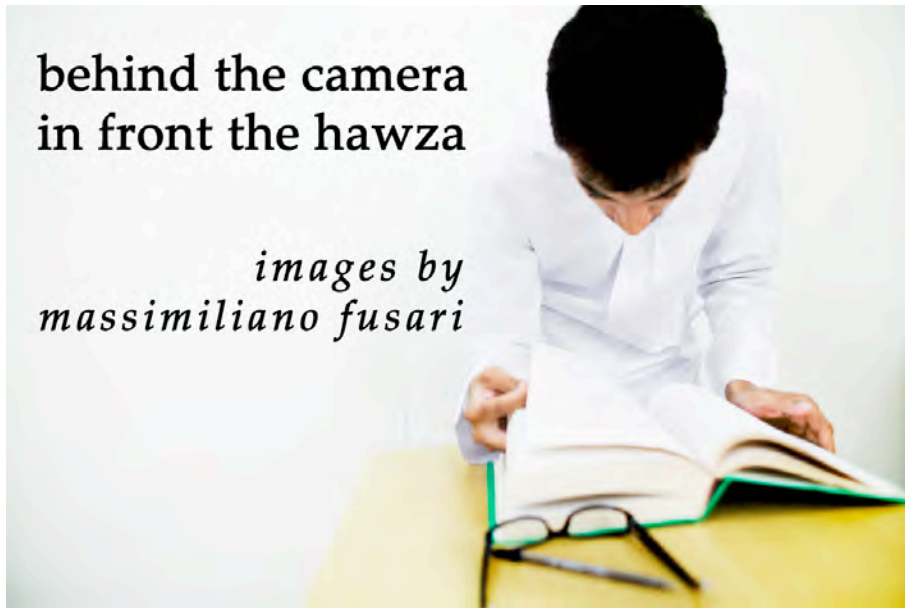


## **[CHAPTER SIX]**

### **ANNEX 03 - BEHIND A CAMERA IN FRONT A HAWZA**

behind the camera  
in front the hawza

*images by  
massimiliano fusari*







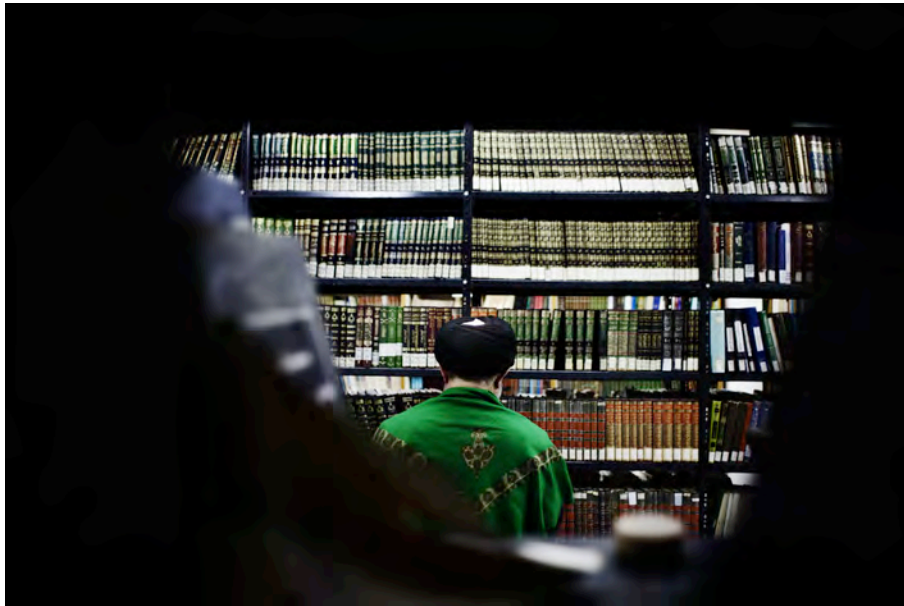


























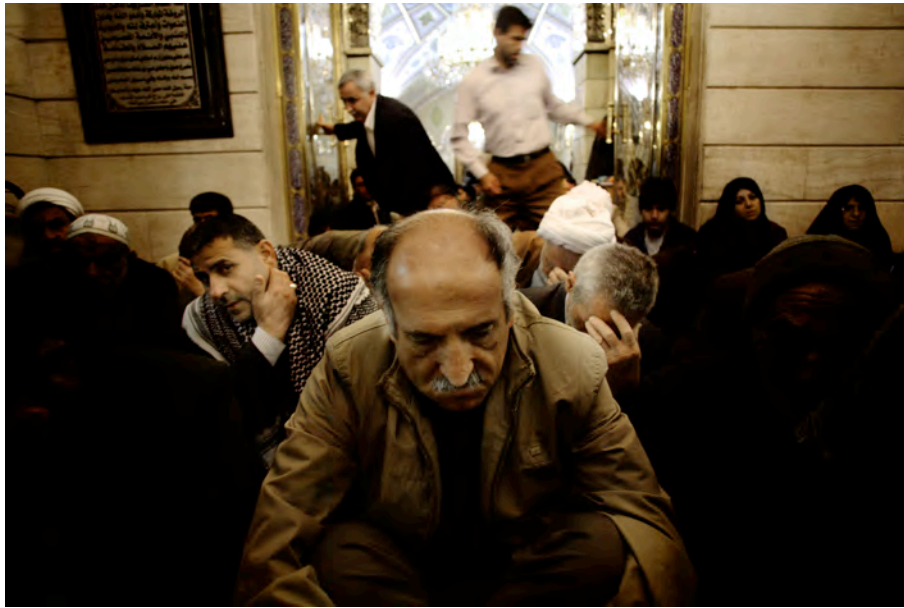


























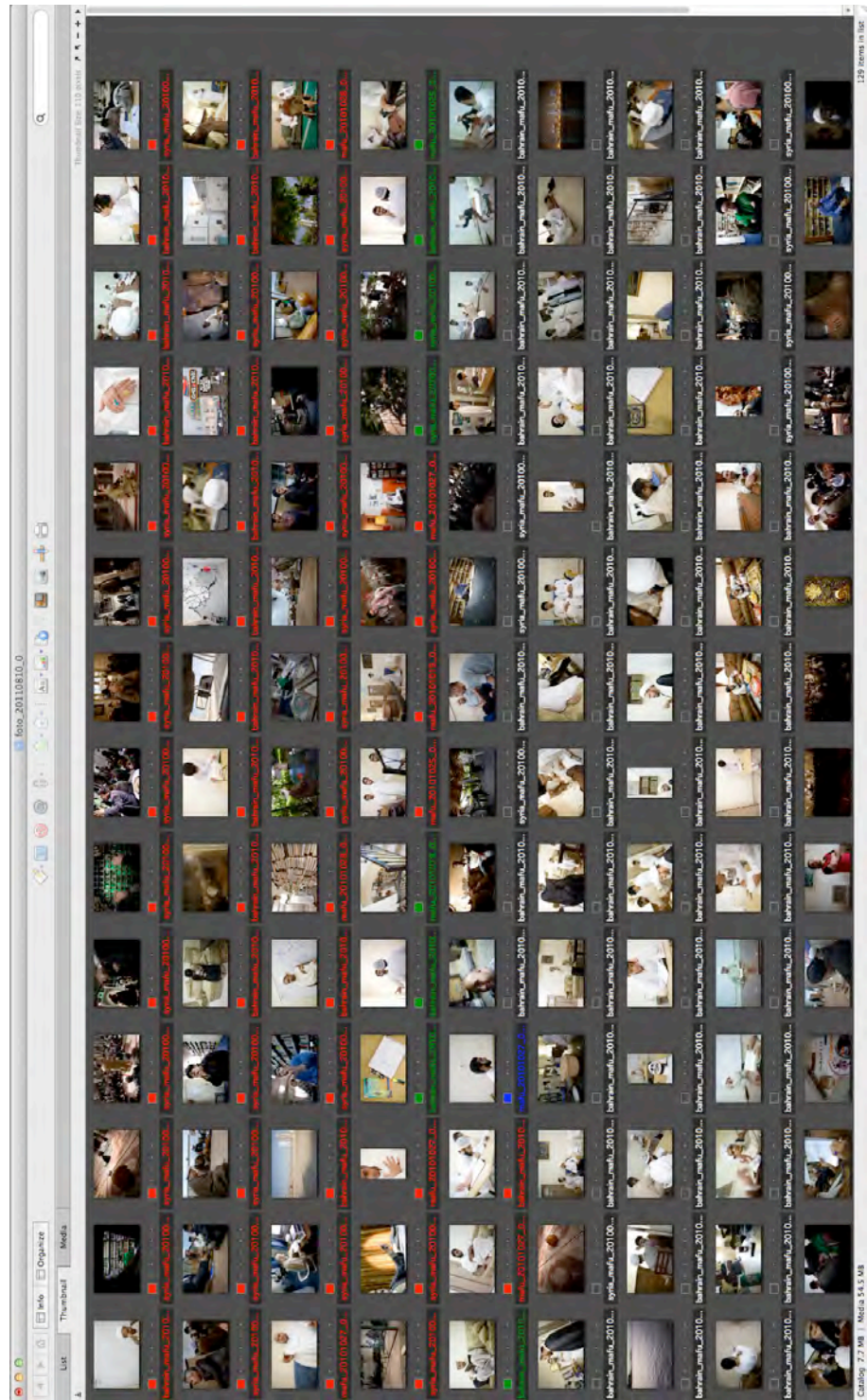


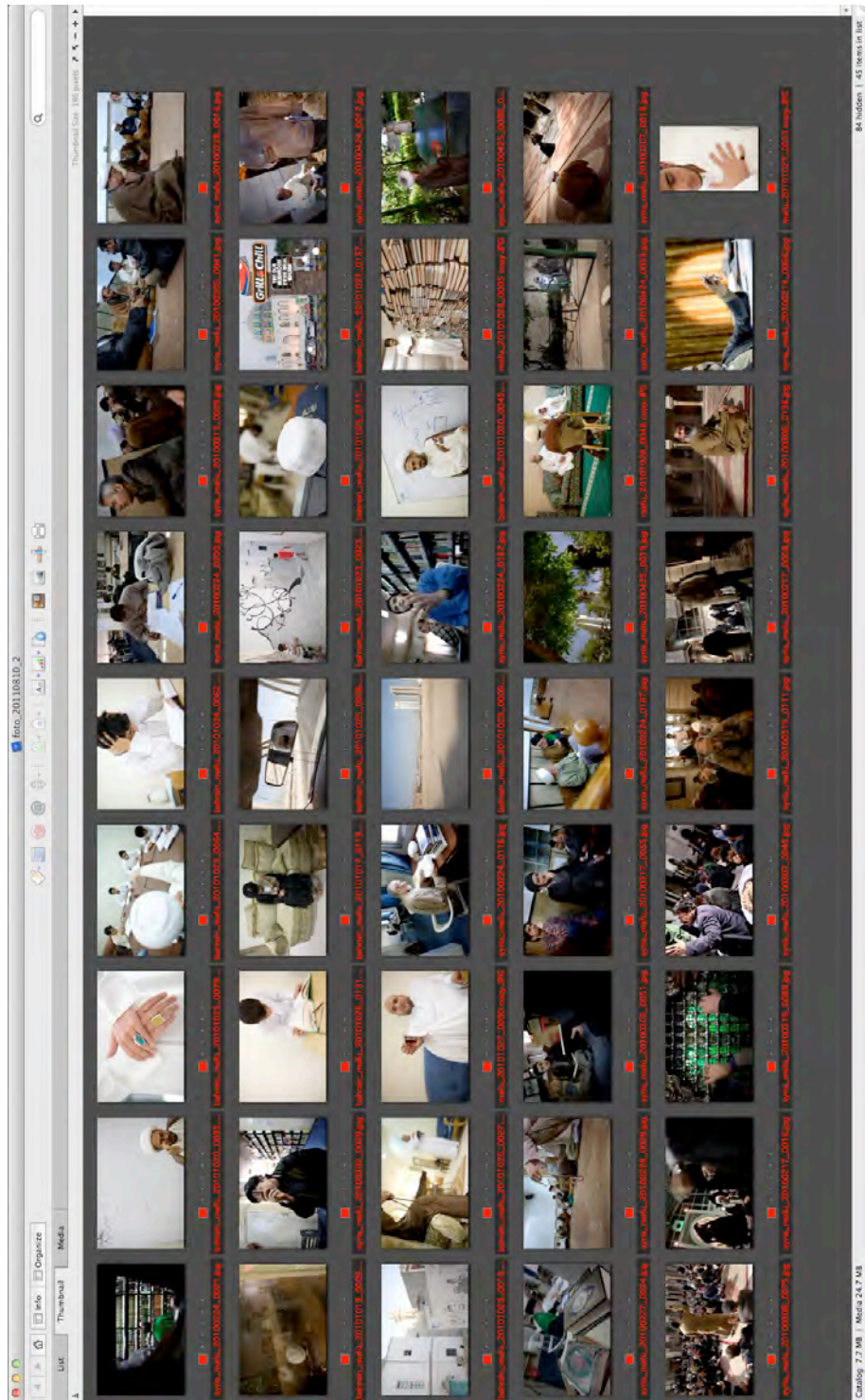
## **[CHAPTER SIX]**

### **ANNEX 04 - EDITING MONTAGES**

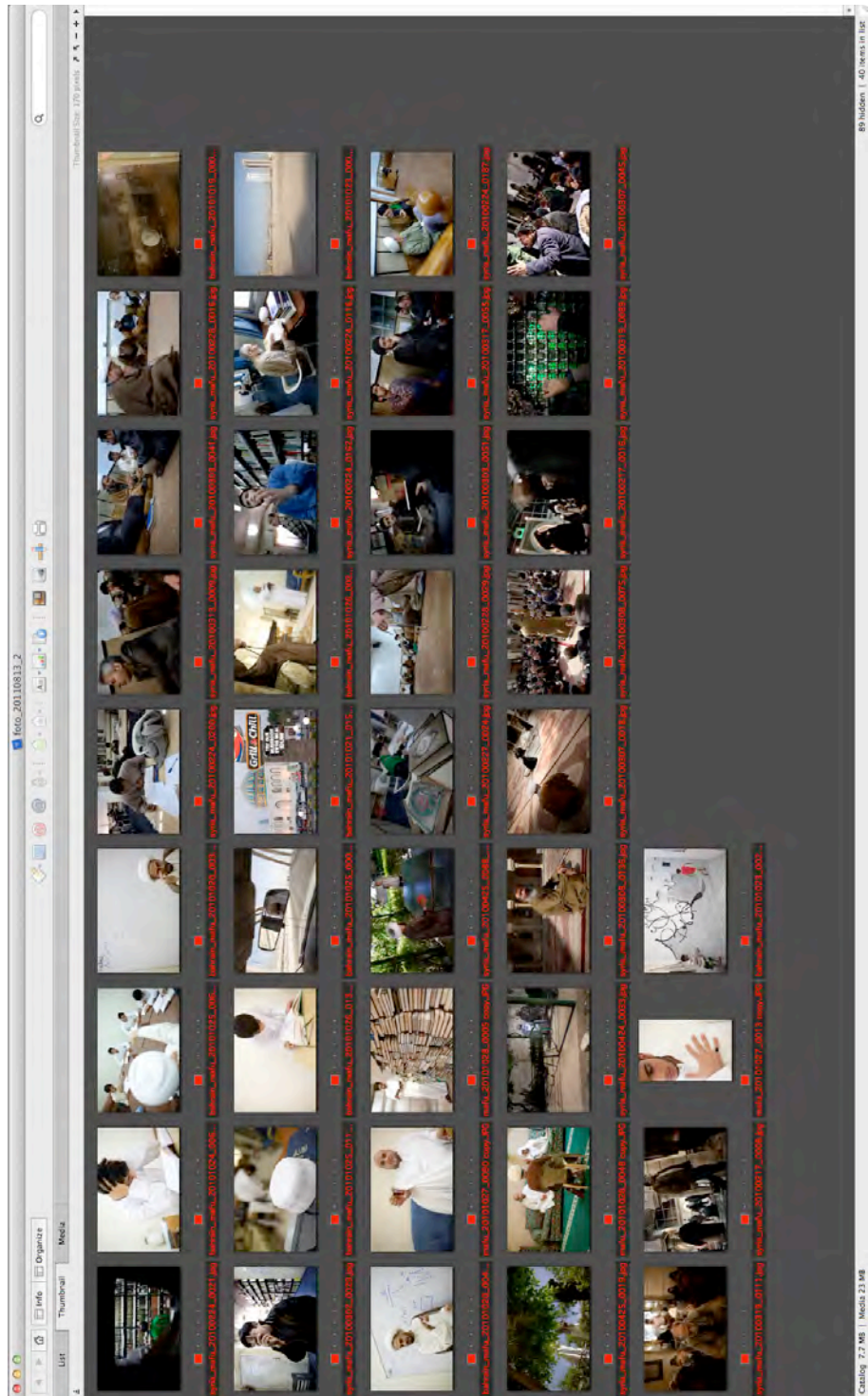
The following seven images offer a very simplified example of how editing can be done: they illustrate the process of refinement of the whole photoreportage for the creation of a visual narrative.



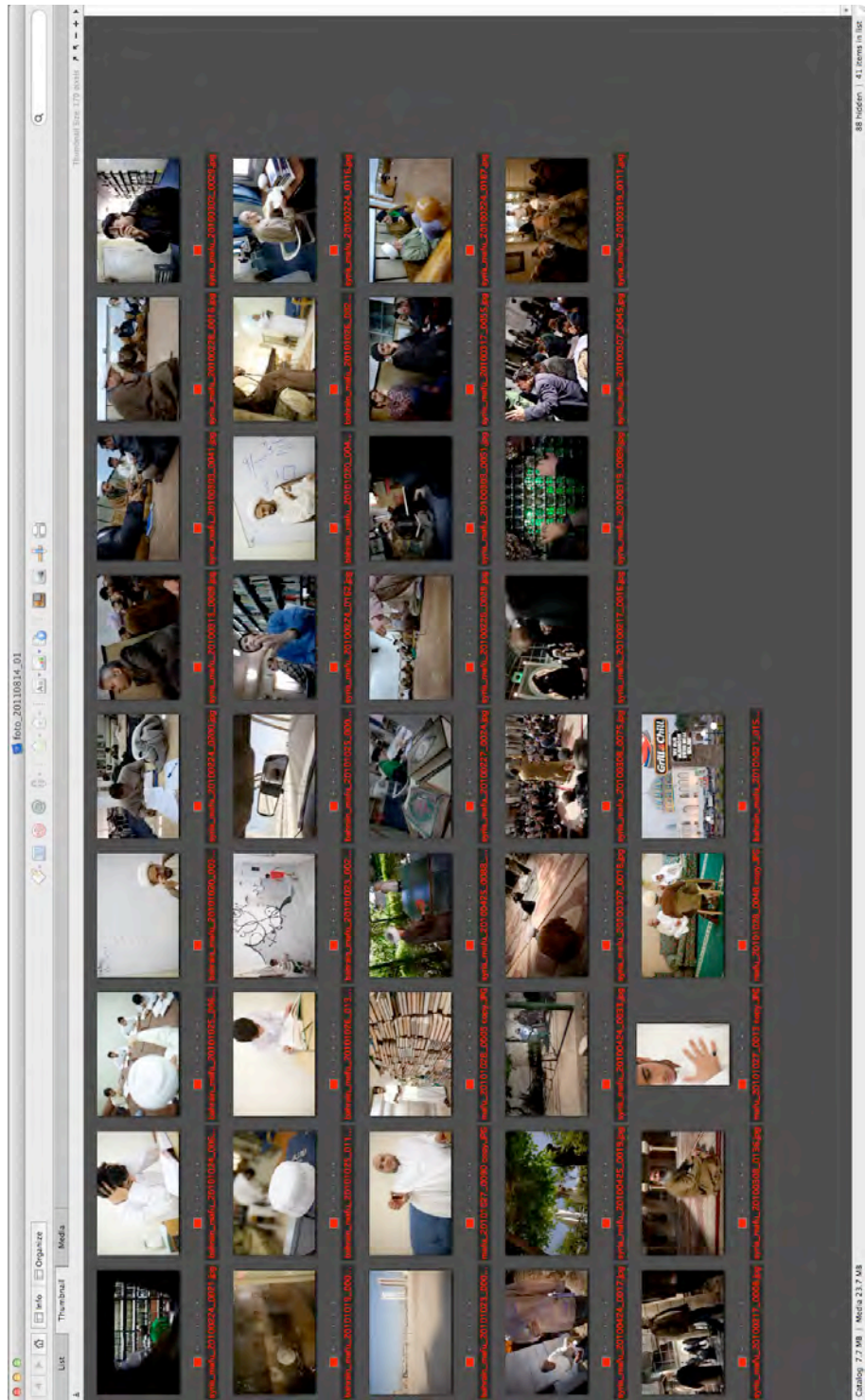


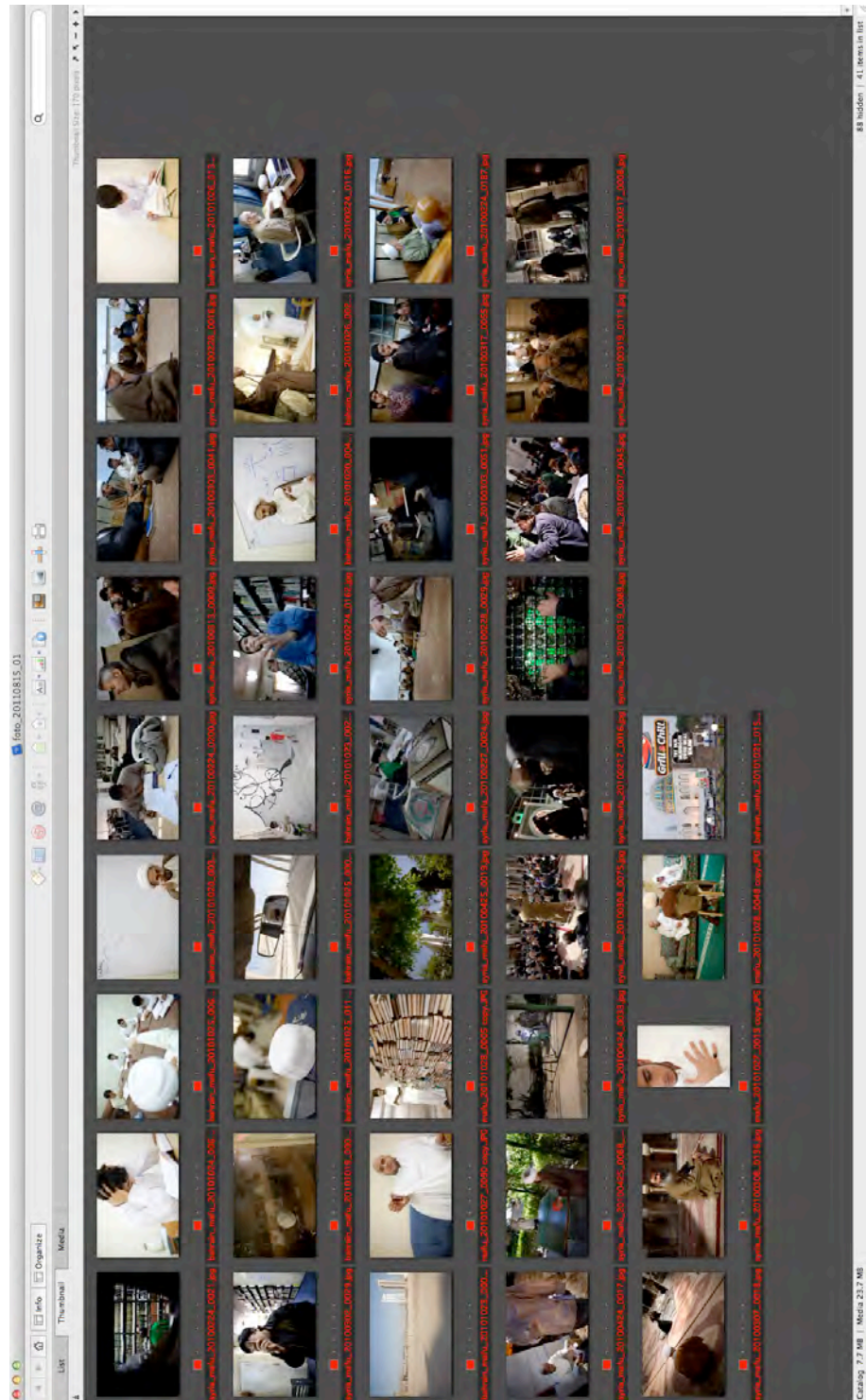






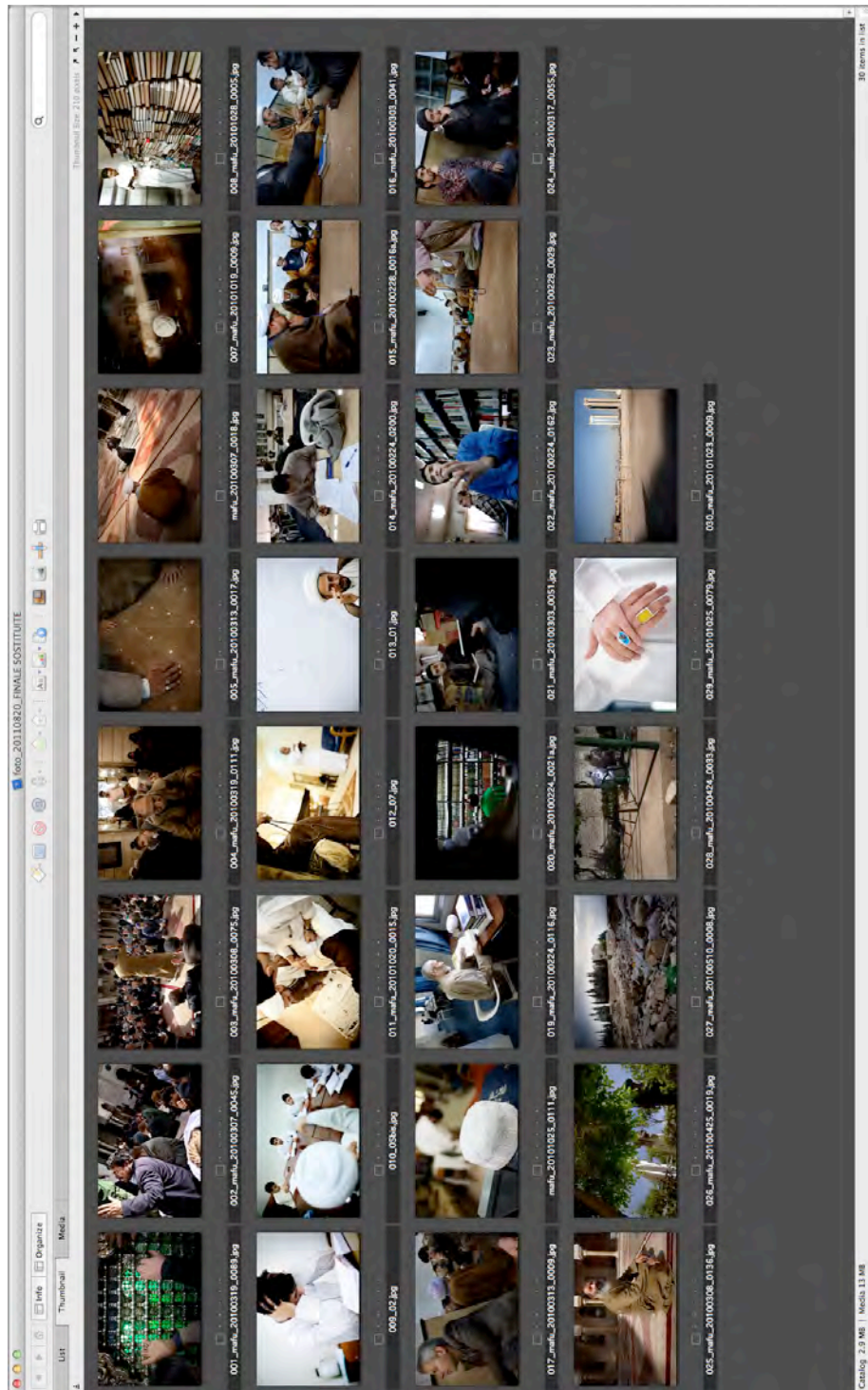














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